

Homily, St. Andrew's
Sunday, October 12, 2014 - Thanksgiving!
Exodus 32:1-14; Philippians 4:1-9

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

What do we do when things don't go our way? When unexpected events, other peoples' choices, or just the randomness of life thwarts our well laid plans, how do we respond? Do we react quickly with the first response that comes to mind? Or do we take a moment to pause, to breathe, to take stock, to work through our emotions, whatever they may be, and calmly decide on a next step?

The story in our first reading today is a classic example of the first option - a quick and emotional reaction to unfolding events. Moses has led the Israelite people out of Egypt and they are in the midst of a journey through the wilderness. Moses has ascended Mt Sinai to chat with God but it takes longer than the people he left at the base of mountain think that it should. As their anxiety increases, so do their demands to the only leader left... "We don't know what's happened to Moses... so Aaron, come, make gods for us..." The emotional reaction is to do something, anything, to fill the void and reduce anxiety by any means necessary. And so they create a Golden Calf. This is not a carefully, thoughtfully or prayerfully considered response to the situation. Rather, it is an impulsive reaction to the discomfort of the unknown.

On the other side of the relationship, God doesn't do any better. When God sees the actions of the Israelite people, God reacts with as much, or more, thoughtless emotion: "I have seen this people," God rants to Moses, "how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation." God's anger and impulsiveness matches the anxiety and impulsiveness of the people, in what could have made for a disastrous encounter. In both cases, the first impulse, the first desire, is to relieve the discomfort of the unexpected situation and emotional response by any means necessary... by the first and most expedient means.

Thankfully, there was one with a clear head. Moses is the one who talks God down from the mountain of anger: "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people." Thank goodness for Moses... for his clear thinking and his courage to speak up. Thank goodness Moses didn't just let God respond out of anger as the Israelites had responded out of anxiety. Thank goodness that Moses knew God better than God knew God... and reminded God of what it means to be divine. Remember who you are. Remember what you have already done. Remember what you have promised. Take a divine breath and change the divine mind away from violence. Choose to honour your promises. Choose patience. Choose grace. Thank goodness for Moses, because God does just that and disaster isn't piled on top of disaster.

Alongside this story of anxiety and idolatry, today we also hear part of another story. The story of the Philippians is not as clear or told as dramatically as the story of the wilderness but there is still a story there, behind and underneath the letter we hear a portion of today. Paul's

letter to the Philippians is written from a place of difficulty, for Paul is imprisoned, to people in difficulty, though we don't really know the nature or extent of it. What we do know is that through the letter, Paul writes of opponents and enemies of the Philippians who seem to be making their lives difficult. Immediately before the lovely passage we hear today, Paul describes people who live as "enemies of the cross," and encourages his readers that "our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation [our humble / lowly bodies] that [we] may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself." (3:20-21) It is only then, after acknowledging the difficulty of their situation, that Paul brings it all together with today's "therefore": "Therefore... stand firm in the Lord..."

The response to the challenge of the time that Paul implores the people to make is not idolatry born of anxiety. It is not thoughtlessly or emotionally reactive and destructive. Instead, Paul calls for something else. Paul calls for confidence, for centeredness, and for prayerfulness. Paul seeks to remind us, right along with the Philippians, who we are, and what we have promised.

Paul's call to stand firm in the Lord is followed by a most gentle rebuke of 2 faithful Philippian women. Apparently there has been some kind of dispute between them and so Paul encourages unity, writing, "be of the same mind in the Lord." What I find most encouraging about it is that though there may be problems, though they may not be perfect, these women are still valued co-workers of Paul in the cause of Christ. The honour afforded the women - Euodia and Syntyche - named co-workers of Paul, when even his loyal companion, presumably carrying the letter, is not named, is rather incredible. It also seems a perfect scripture for this day of thanksgiving when we remember and honour in particular, Doris Ford.

In a few minutes, we will bless some new sacred vessels for our community in memory of Doris, along with several other items. I know many of you have stories and memories of her. I, unfortunately, didn't know her personally but yet with all of you, I am grateful for her life and witness to the Gospel, along with so many other great and faithful women like her, because I know that I have the freedom to work in ministry because of women like her. Her's are the shoulders on which I stand, along with those of so many others, including today Euodia and Syntyche. I am grateful for the work each have done for the Gospel, as co-workers with husbands and fathers, priests and friends. It is good to hear today that faithful women and men have struggled along together in the work of the gospel since the beginning, and together find their names in the book of life.

Paul goes on to give final instructions to the Philippians. And even in the face of difficulty, Paul's call is to joy: "Rejoice in the Lord always;" he writes, "again I will say, Rejoice." It is completely in line with the tone and message of the entire letter. As one commentator reflects, "the characteristic note of Paul's letter to the Philippians is above all that of joy... Paul's faith triumphs over adversity and causes him to rejoice, whatever happens." (NIB, 469) This characteristic of joy is found right from the top, stemming from gratitude, as Paul begins the letter, "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you..." (1:3) And this attitude of gratitude, with its resulting joyfulness, continues through to the concluding chapter 4 from which we hear today.

More instructions flow from the rejoicing... "Let your gentleness be known... do not worry... in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." I often wonder about these kinds of simple, shotgun instructions that are so easy to say and so hard to do. How on earth are we supposed to just "not worry" about anything!?

But the key seems to be in the last... by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving. This is about not acting and reacting out of our very normal anxiety. This is about not impulsively doing the first thing that comes to mind to alleviate our discomfort, particularly when life isn't going our way. This is about rejecting the idols we too quickly turn to and actively choosing instead a different path. It is about taking a moment to breathe, to pause, to pray. It is about letting our Lord draw near to us and it is about expressing our need once we have found a moment to give thanks for God's presence.

Finally Paul expresses the result, the promise, of following the instructions. It is a promise of peace... the peace of God, which surpasses understanding. This is peace beyond an absence of conflict. This is peace that is total well-being. This is peace that comes from God through grace, to those joined to Christ in prayer such that the heart and mind of God in Christ becomes theirs too. The blessing of peace means that we have the power to choose the best of our culture and the best of ourselves - whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent and worthy of praise. The power to choose the best of who we are and the best who we can be is ours as we follow the good examples in our community and throughout our tradition.

Whether things go our way or not, whether we find ourselves facing unexpected events or difficult times, on this day of thanksgiving, let us turn from our anxious and idolatrous reactions and choose instead to respond with gentleness and joy. Let us choose to give thanks and to rejoice, that we may know the peace of God, that surpasses all understanding.