

## Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Aug 5th 2015

Today's readings give us a clear message that the Lord is not happy with us if we are driven by fear rooted in lack of trust in God. In fact, we are told, God rewards behavior that is bold and confident in His compassion.

In the first reading from Numbers God instructs Moses to send a group of leaders from the tribes to investigate the land God plans to give them. The "princes" of the tribes who are chosen are presumed to be representative of the best and brightest of each of the twelve families. They are sent ahead to reconnoiter, to "scope out" the territory on the other side of the river in order to find the best place and way to bring the rest of the community into the land. But these heroes are terrified by the people they find in this new place, and, despite its riches and possibilities for their flourishing, they are terrified even of the land itself (it "consumes its inhabitants"). What they have obviously forgotten are the very recent acts of God to rescue them from a land that was consuming its inhabitants (Egypt), and from a very competent army (Pharaoh's troops). Why would God not be there for them in this new situation to make their passage successful? Why would God not be able to work in them to accomplish the Divine purpose?

God is profoundly annoyed with them and with their kinsmen who listened to their fear and responded with "group panic." The Lord's displeasure is so great that he curses them with their earlier worst nightmare – of dying in the wilderness unmarked and unremembered (if you recall the complaints earlier in this year's cycle when they were being chased by the Pharaoh's army – that was the angry outcry against Moses and this Lord he represented). God will delay the peoples' entry into the new land by one year for everyday that their leaders explored – thus they are confined to the wilderness for 40 years – and essentially this generation of adults will all die off. One other thing we might consider about the number 40 is that it is a symbolic number for genesis of new life. God is creating a new people that he will birth in the waters of the Jordan after they have gestated in the womb of the wilderness for 40 years. (Think of the natural gestation period for humans of 40 weeks – thus all 4's, 40's, 400's etc. are somehow about birth of new beginnings in the biblical numerology).

A Millennium or so later, Jesus will reverse the "curse" by spending 40 days in the desert after his Baptism. While in the desert he remains faithfully fearless in the face of the temptations to self-preservation and power in order to restore the lost sheep in the house of Israel. In this he sees the fullness of his vocation until he encounters this Pagan (Syrian) woman who requests God's saving gift for her daughter. His rebuff of her is met by a bold courage on her part, a deep and knowing faith in His authority – the sense that he speaks and acts on behalf of God's Self – and a confidence that God's mercy is not limited by her marginal status in the eyes of Israel. This faith can only come from God's Spirit – and thus Jesus discerns the extent of his own vocation beyond Israel's sheep to all the nations. Jesus rewards her with the status of a faithful one with its reward of the requested healing. Thus is God's reign disclosed beyond Israel's boundaries, and each of us is a beneficiary of her courage and faith.

I am moved by today's invitation to have confidence in God's promises. These are not "guarantees" of exact outcomes, but promises of good outcomes based on an intimacy that convinces me the God can will no harm for me and will be there on my behalf if others do will me harm, or even if I bring harm upon myself by stupidly pursuing the wrong things. I am especially moved that Jesus' heart is

turned by the great needs of a worried and wounded woman who longs for health for her child and that the Church has held this memory of Jesus' discernment of the Father's will beyond his original (limited) human imagination.

Today will be an especially good day for me to pray for the Syrian people – suffering, wounded and torn apart by a conflict – that God will again grant them salvation and healing because of the great faith of this bold ancestress who dared to challenge Jesus to become the yet more perfect “face” of God in human terms.

Eileen Burke-Sullivan-Creighton University's Mission and Ministry