July 23, 2017 16th Sunday of the Year 10:00 (10:30)

**Mass to celebrate the Jubilees/Anniversaries of 9 Sisters of St. Joseph (9 Jubilarians: 1-75 years; 6-60 years, 2-50 years)**

Jesus really does have a way with words as He concluded this Gospel passage in which He shared 3 powerful Parables: “*Whoever has ears ought to hear”.* So simple, yet so very profound. We might have the ability to do something, but, sadly enough, that doesn’t mean that we always do what we should, whether it’s “hearing” God’s Word, or doing what God’s Word challenges us to do.

I love this time of year as I’m out and about, driving through the 9 counties of the Diocese, and outside the bigger cities, seeing nothing but fields, lush, green, and ripe for harvest. This past Thursday, I had the pleasure of celebrating Mass at one of the Migrant Camps in South Haven. It was such a beautiful setting---out in the middle of the fields, toward dusk when the heat had subsided and there was even some cool breezes, right after the migrant workers had returned back to the camp after a long, back-breaking, hot day in the fields. It was wonderful to be in that setting, right next to the Corn Fields---I could almost “hear” the corn growing!!!

Jesus must have loved this time of year as well….at least He loved the agrarian and rural life of first century Galilee. Jesus had a very important message to teach---He wanted us to know about the incomprehensible Mysteries of the Nature of God and the Kingdom of God, but how could our finite and limited human minds grasp such mysteries? And so, Jesus used Parables to make those “incomprehensible mysteries” understandable by using our own human experiences.

The first of the three parables gets all the attention in Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus spends time explaining this one to His disciples; He tells them what it means: that the Weeds were sown among the Wheat by an Enemy. The Master’s advice was to let them alone so as not to risk hurting the wheat along with the weeds. In our world, weeds and wheat/sinners and saints/evil and good live and grow together. Our main responsibility is to grow in goodness. It is God’s responsibility to judge and, if need be, condemn. It’s very important that we keep those responsibilities clear----and remember that we are not God.

The second and third Parables that Jesus tells today are really significant, and very appropriate for today. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed, so small but it has the possibility of becoming huge. And the Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast which, when added to the flour, produces a beautiful loaf of bread.

The subject of all 3 of the Parables is the Kingdom of Heaven, but in each one, Jesus has us consider it from different perspectives for the purpose of making 3 different points: the first deals with completion----harvest---the end of the process; the second deals with potential---the very beginning of the process; the third deals with additives, such as Yeast, which helps the process of growing along the way, and helps to make it better.

In recent years, Pope Francis has been doing something similar. He’s been asking us to see the Church---the mission of the Church----the role of those of us who are engaged in ministry in the Church-----from different vantage points, or perspectives.

It’s like looking at a Prism or a Jewel, and seeing different light angels as they refract and reflect in different ways, showing different aspects of beauty. Pope Francis is not presenting anything new or radical in his teaching; he’s just asking us to consider our Faith, and our role, from a different perspective

I recently had the pleasure of attending the Convocation of Catholic Leaders in Orlando, along with 8 other people from our Diocese. There were people from all over the U.S. present, representing the entire Church: laity, religious, priests, deacons, bishops----all reflecting on Pope Francis’ landmark exhortation,“The Joy of the Gospel”, in which he asks us to see our Church, and our responsibilities in the Church, in a new way.

Today we celebrate the lives of 9 Sisters of St. Joseph: 1 celebrating 75 years, 6 celebrating 60 years, and 2 celebrating 50 years of Religious Life---for a grand, cumulative total of 535 years of Religious Witness in the world. They have served as Teachers at all levels of the educational process from Daycare to Graduate School, they have served as Authors, Social Workers, Literacy Advocates; they have been engaged in Inner City social services among the chronically poor, as well as ministering to the truly marginalized in ministries to those who are incarcerated; and they have served as missionaries in Haiti and Medical Technicians in Peru. But, no matter what the particular ministry of each of these Jubilarians, they have done so as a Sister of St. Joseph, as one consecrated to the Lord Jesus in an intimate relationship of love and service; they have lived their lives truly as witnesses of the Gospel, and, to use Pope Francis’ favorite title, as “missionary disciples” going out to the peripheries to bring the Gospel of Love and Mercy.

Your lives, dear Jubilarians, and the lives of all of you, my dear Sisters of St. Joseph, are current day “Parables” of what the Kingdom of God is like. Besides the Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat, the Mustard Seed, and the Parable of the Yeast, I am quite certain that Jesus would likely point to the lives of consecrated Religious Women and Men, and in particular to these Jubilarians we honor today, and say: the Kingdom of Heaven is like these women who have chosen to embrace a life of absolute commitment to following Jesus, vowing to live according to the Gospel values of poverty, chastity and obedience, and service to your dear neighbor.

And in the example of our Lord Himself, and taking our cue from Pope Francis who asks us to turn the prism and see and live differently in light of the current needs in our world, we don’t wait for the “dear neighbor” to come to our door and ask for assistance; we go out to our parishes and our schools where there is much need, but we also go to the peripheries of society---to the inner cities, the jails, to secular settings and even to foreign lands----and there, too, help people to use the “ears” God gave them to truly “hear” the Saving Message of the Gospel of Love and Mercy.

In today’s First Reading (which was chosen especially for this celebration), we heard the Prophet Jeremiah speaking on God’s behalf, and saying to the People of Israel---and to each of us: “*I know well the plans I have in mind for you.”*

I know that each of you, dear Jubilarians, had plans for yourselves 50, 60 and 75 years ago. You had come to know in your heart that God was calling you to live your life as a Sister of St. Joseph. But, I’m pretty sure you didn’t know on the day you made your First Profession where God would lead you throughout these years of your Religious Life. But God did----God knew 75, 60 and 50 years ago all the wonderful ways you would give witness on His behalf; He knew all the countless number of people’s lives you would touch and perhaps even change from “weeds” into “flourishing wheat”; He knew the places you would willingly go when sent because of your pledge of obedience, and God knew all the times that your vows and your Religious Commitment would be what sustained you in times when you were challenged or tempted to do otherwise.

The theme of this Jubilee Celebration “**A Future Full of Hope**” is so appropriate, because as that Reading from Jeremiah continues, God’s plans for us are always for our “*welfare and not for our harm”.*

Today, dear Jubilarians, we think back to that day 50, 60 and 75 years ago when your Religious Life was just a “mustard seed”, but look what it has bloomed into all these years later. We give thanks to God, on this day, for all the “yeast” that has been added into the raw dough of your religious life along the way----through prayer, support of your dear Sisters, the inspiration of our dear Blessed Mother and St. Joseph, and of course, the countless graces of God---which has caused your lives to have “raised” into a great Gift to God.

Today, at this Present moment, we give thanks for all that has been in the Past to bring us to this day; and in just a minute, you will renew your commitment to continue on, into this Future full of Hope, as evangelical witnesses and missionary disciples in whatever ways God continues to call you to do so. As the great St. Augustine, our Diocesan Patron, said: “Trust the past to God’s Mercy; trust the present to God’s Love; and trust the Future to God’s Providence.” In other words, God is merciful, God is loving, and will always provide for our spiritual needs.

Congratulations, dear Jubilarians, and may God shower His blessings upon all of you, dear Sisters of St. Joseph, as, together, abiding in God’s loving Providence, we move into the Future full of Hope.

God bless you!

Bishop Paul J. Bradley