

EVERY SAINT HAS A PAST; EVERY SINNER A FUTURE

One of the highlights of our pilgrimages to the Holy Land every other year is that we end the first day we arrive at a kibbutz on the Sea of Galilee. It is called Nof Ginosur. It is a hotel and farm complex right on the Sea of Galilee. You can arise early in the morning, get a cup of coffee and walk on down to the shores of the Sea of Galilee and watch the sun begin to shine on the waters. It is lovely, memorable and lends itself to recall and reflection. You can look out on the waters and imagine Peter and his compatriots trying to drag in their nets which had come up empty all night now so full to overflowing that they have to call to the other boats to come and help them. There is a big catch and then there is what is described in the gospel for today. Abundance. Abundaza! More, more and way over the top more. There's big and then there's this—gihugic! There will be another such miraculous occurrence while fishing after the resurrection. And when it happens they will all immediately remember and realize that Jesus is back. He is risen! As he said.

And then there was the wedding over at Cana in Galilee where they ran short of wine. FHB is what we would say in situations like that—Family Hold Back. When there wasn't going to be enough for all the invited guests, the family would go without so the guests could be served. What Jesus does is to do something truly lavish, over the top. He transforms 6 full water jars into 120 gallons of fine wine. 120 gallons! That's a lot of wine. There is a couple of extra cases of wine and then there is 120 gallons. Abundance.

Then on the mountainside above the Sea of Galilee Jesus blesses a handful of loaves of bread and begins to distribute the bread to all seated there. Over 5000 are fed and there are more left over fragments than there were loaves to begin with. Amazing! Abundance. And Jesus will repeat this miracle too. He always starts with something small, whatever is at hand and in the blessing, a genuine transformation takes place. Jesus is lavish with his powers to heal—blind, lame, deaf, lepers. He raises the daughter of Jairus. He restores the son to the widow of Nain. He calls Lazarus his friend out of the grave to return him to his family.

He teaches everyone not just a few. No one is left out. Everyone who has ears to hear can hear. All they have to do is show up—and listen—and open themselves to the truth of his message. And even though others who are threatened by him and his message seek his death and conspire to have him eliminated in a horrendous kind of death after false charges and accusations are lodged against him. Even after being hanged on a tree, he looks down at those who kill him and says: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Even in painful death he is lavish with his grace, lavish with his mercy, and lavish with his forgiveness. After he is risen from the

grave he will appear to many people. He will ask for their faith and he will offer them life everlasting. He will offer it to any and all who want it. It is there for the asking.

Peter in the gospel has a moment of recognition when it dawns on him how godly Jesus is, how filled with grace and generosity he is. Peter tells Jesus he should go away. Jesus doesn't. Instead he turns to sinful Peter and say: "C'mon. We have to go catch some people." Peter, sinner that he is, takes the invitation and goes along. He will never be the same but he will truly be the man he has always wanted to be.

Saul of Tarsus is one of the enemies of Jesus. He is persecuting those who follow and believe in the Nazarene. Saul seeks to put them into jail. Jesus appears to him on the Road to Damascus. The encounter stuns Saul and knocks him to the ground He can't see. When he comes to his senses he has been changed. Jesus is who he claimed to be and Saul now believes that. He who was persecuting now will become a believer and not only a believer but an evangelizer, Even more, Saul will travel around and found little communities of believers in Jesus. Saul of Tarsus will change his name to Paul to signify the new person he has become like Abram became Abraham and Jacob became Israel and Simon became Peter. This Paul will become one of the great saints of the early church. An apostle, the least of the apostles, but an apostle nonetheless. Paul has become a convert to this new way of life. His past doesn't matter. Peter's past sins don't matter. The Lord will use anybody and everybody to get his message out.

The message of Jesus Christ is a message of abundance and life for all. It is available for each person. Take some time this weekend and do some thinking about the moments when God's grace has been there for you. Think of the moments of abundance that were signs of the goodness of God. Think of how many times the Lord could have cut you off, could have been done with you but never was. I know he has never given up on me. I know he never will.

Lent begins this Wednesday. Do some fasting and praying. Do some extra giving of money for those in need. Give extra to the Catholic Charities Appeal which truly helps a lot of very ordinary people. But think about this one thing. God wants you to be the instrument in his hand to bring the message to the people around you—no matter what your past has been. It just doesn't matter. Peter and Paul were sinful men with strengths and flaws. God called them anyway. It's not about someone else—it's about us, you and me. Do the Lenten things you do for Lent. But do something more. Become part of the abundance. Be merciful yourself.