

**Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time – Year B
(Feb. 26, 2006)**

New Wine

Did you ever think of God as lover? The Bible does. It's one of the most striking images in the Old Testament: God relating to the people the way a loving husband relates to his wife.

We hear this kind of spousal imagery in both our first reading from the prophet Hosea and in the Gospel passage where Jesus compares himself to a bridegroom. Can this tell us something about how we relate to God or how we might relate to God?

Many spiritual writers today are taking this spousal imagery and using it to spell out a new approach to spirituality, one based on desire, love, and, yes, even passion. One prominent theologian writes this way: There is a passion in the universe: the young stars, the whirling galaxies – the living, pulsing earth thrives in the passionate embrace of life itself. Our love for one another is the language of our passionate God. It is desire that spins us round, desire that sends the blood through our veins, desire that draws us into one another's arms and onward in the lifelong search for God's face. In the touch of each other's hands we feel God's presence.

What we just heard from Hosea speaks of God's passion, God's longing for a people, Israel, who had strayed, to return. "I will take her out into the desert and speak to her heart. . . . I will espouse you to me forever. I will espouse you in fidelity and you shall know the Lord." You shall know the Lord, not just an intellectual knowledge, but a knowledge that comes from experiencing the love and goodness of God in their lives, an experience that awakens in the people a desire that is similar to God's desire, a longing to be one with the beloved as husband and wife become one in marriage.

Pope Benedict spoke of this same kind of love in his recent encyclical which was all about love. He showed how there is a continuum from the love of attraction which we call eros through the love of friendship to agape which is the pure unselfish love with which God loves us and with which we strive to love God in return as well as one another.

Jesus uses the same spousal imagery we heard in Isaiah. He, himself, is the bridegroom and his disciples are the bride. By extension so is the Church and so are we. It might sound strange to us, but the Jewish people of Jesus' time would have had no problem with it.

Now along with this image of Jesus as bridegroom the Gospel gives us another emphasis, not only on the relationship between God and the people, or even between Jesus and his followers, but on the newness of what Jesus is proposing.

What we read here in this passage from Mark's Gospel is not just a reflection of what was happening in Jesus' time but also of some of the struggles that faced the community that Mark was writing for. The early Church struggled to determine its relationship with Judaism and its laws and customs. In today's Gospel that same early church found Jesus offering a solution to some of its vexing problems. New times, they learned, required new measures. Jesus challenges the religious leaders of his time to look at things differently. And they found this very difficult. Perhaps one of the problems was that their religious observances had become so routine that they forgot the real meaning of what they were doing. This is a danger for religious people of all time, ourselves as well.

For some people change is admissible in every area of life except religion. Various reasons might explain that. In a sea of change in life, in the world we live in, religion or the church, we think, should be a rock of stability. Besides that, many of us grew up with the idea of the church being as changeless as God. And so when the Second Vatican Council proposed changes, many people were upset – some still are more than forty years later. On the other hand there was also a great deal of enthusiasm about the Council's reforms, and there were some exciting, creative, but also turbulent times in implementing those reforms. That turbulence sometimes made for confusion and the almost inevitable result was a bit of a backlash with people calling for retrenchment and a return to the stability and order that they felt characterized the pre-Vatican II Church.

But you know, Christianity in its origins was a far more radical departure than anything proposed by Vatican II. According to the Gospels Jesus spent a great deal of time dealing with opponents of change. Continuity with Judaism may very well be clearer to us today after two millennia of reflection than it was when the Church began. But for those

first Christians it was a wrenching institutional rupture and it did not happen easily.

Jesus did not come with a religion of laws. He came with a vital new Spirit, a Spirit of love, and he wanted to bring his people back to that ancient idea of the spousal relationship with God. It did not take long to see that the two, the religion of laws that had developed in Israel and the new Spirit of love, did not quite match. New wine calls for new skins. New times require new methods. Diverse cultures require adaptation. The basic tenets of faith remain, but many things do not fall under the mantle of basic tenets. It takes courage to move. Institutions tend to resist change. But Paul keeps reminding us that promotion of the Gospel is central and that requires adaptation and creativity. It also means a willingness to let go in order to rediscover.

In that regard the Church of the first century had struggles far greater than ours. And it survived. It survived despite multiple changes. That's because whenever things went too far in the wrong direction God raised up prophets, just as in the Old Testament times, to remind us that things could be better, that things should be different: Francis of Assisi in the Middle Ages; Theresa of Avila in the sixteenth century; John XXIII in the twentieth. They were all reformers, calling people to a more authentic way of living and worshipping and loving our God and one another. Our prayer today must be for the grace to continue to respond to that call, sincerely, generously, lovingly.

In our first reading from Hosea we heard God say about Israel, "I will lure her out into the desert and I will speak to her heart." Next Sunday, the first Sunday of Lent, the Gospel will tell us that the Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert where he spent forty days in prayer and in combat with the forces of evil. In both instances we are hearing about close intimate contact between God and the people or Jesus and the Father. That same intimate contact is possible for all of us and indeed it is there in our own personal desert in quiet moments of prayer, that we will gain knowledge and experience of God's love for us and how we are to return that love. We are fortunate in our parish that during this Lenten season we will have many opportunities to spend time in prayer both together and individually. I encourage you, indeed I urge you, to look carefully at the flyer provided with all the many opportunities that the parish is offering this Lent. I

especially want to point out the service of Evening Prayer that will take place this Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, at 7:30 p.m. This will be a beautiful, musical setting for one of the Church's most ancient and traditional forms of prayer. Everyone is invited. It would be a wonderful way to begin this holy season and make this Lent a special time of prayer for each and every member of our parish.