

4th Sunday Ordinary Time

January 27-28, 2018

Readings: Deut. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 7:32-35; Mark 1:21-28

I have long since given up downhill skiing, but I certainly remember the warning signs placed on various hills. Some symbols were straightforward describing the degree of difficulty on the hill – green circles, blue squares and black diamonds. My friends skills developed more quickly and I was fearful of the Black diamonds and warning signs– “Beyond this point, ski at your own risk...”

Our first reading spoke of prophets who presumed to speak in God’s name something other than that which was commanded. These prophets were disobedient, straying beyond their orders. What is the obvious connection? You have been warned; from now on you are on your own. Similarly, once we think that we are no longer in need of God’s help, we continue at our own risk.

The warning signs are not significantly different with regard to our faith. The ship has long been seen as a symbol for the Church. Once we leave the barque of Peter, especially if by a deliberate act, we sail on at our own risk. The *barchetta* was an ancient symbol, hearkening back to Noah’s Ark and today’s first reading.

The ship is the Church tossed on the sea of disbelief, worldliness, and persecution but finally reaching safe harbor with its cargo of human souls. When people falsely speak in God’s name, the potential damage is severe. "*Corruptio optimi pessimum est*, says the Latin proverb: 'the corruption of the best is the worst'. My biggest fear as a priest is if I through error, could lead someone astray.

We pray for our Holy Father and the bishops in union with Him firstly that they may be guided in their critical ministry of fostering unity in the Church. They are our shepherds, always seeking the lost sheep, while protecting the entire flock entrusted to their care. Secondly, we pray for them due to their difficult task of preserving unity in the Church. They are approached from all sides, each seeking some form of recourse and they have borne a fair share of

criticism, some deserved and some not. It cannot be an easy spot, even if it comes with the territory.

Far too many have left the Church, seeing her as either irrelevant, outdated, or too difficult for them. Others use scandal, at times real and shameful, to justify their exit. Others, bewildered by the confusion that has at times even followed magisterial documents, allow their frustration to morph into public criticism and even ridicule of the Church's teaching. We ought to restrain ourselves from engaging in such public criticism, as it serves no good.

We priests ought never to defend the indefensible, any more than we should cave to secular pressure to water down the Gospel truths. It is not easy to reconcile these opposing forces; we must rely on a solid framework of prayer and discernment, choosing to teach, to lead, to witness to the truth in charity and with compassion.

St. Francis de Sales, whose feast we observed last week, wryly commented: "In the royal galley of divine love, there is no galley slave. All the rowers are volunteers... We are not drawn to God by iron chains, but by sweet attractions and holy inspirations." Unity within the Church cannot be forced; it must be deeply felt, even when we may seem to question her prerogatives. Are you ready to proceed on your own, separated from the ship sailing into port?

As the Church is made up of flawed human beings, people within the Church will error, have erred, and will continue to do so. Our history is filled with enough examples, as are our own lives. Yet, we forge ahead, confident that the Church has been able to accomplish so much good over so many centuries precisely because God is guiding the ship to port.