

Sunday 4

Some of you may be saying to yourselves, “I hope he is brief tonight because I want to get home in time for the game.” Now suppose someone heard your thought and then said to you, “What game?” You would probably look at that person and then say to him and her in utter disbelief, “You’ve got to be kidding. You don’t know what game I am talking about it?” And if the person then said to you, “No, I don’t,” then you would patiently explain to him or her what game you are talking about. And then you might say to that person, as politely as you could at this point, “Where do you live?” And in your mind you might be saying to yourself, “On what planet do you live?” For how could anyone here in Boston not know what game will be played this evening!

I am not a football fan. In fact, I sometimes wonder if it should not be outlawed or, if not that, then fundamentally changed, so that those who play it will not later die of brain disease. And I suspect that future parents will steer their children away from it to something healthier. But at the moment it is huge with us, and especially with us Bostonians because of our local team and its 41 year old quarterback Tom Brady.

Now how could our obsession with the Patriots and Brady be related to today's reading? Well, let's suppose that 19 years ago when Brady first started playing for the Patriots, the fans of the LA team (whatever that team was then) really didn't notice him, except to notice that he came from California. But then as the years mounted and Brady and the Patriots won the Super-bowl numerous times, some of these LA people might have begun to say to themselves: "Well, he's just one of us. He could have done the same thing here. And then they might start to say: Why didn't he do it here?" And then they might sour on him.

But here the comparison between the Patriots and Brady and our Lord in today's Gospel scene breaks down. We know that Tom Brady couldn't completely control where he played and for whom. But that does not seem to have been the case with this scene in the Gospel. Jesus could decide where and to whom he wanted to preach, and at some point in his career (according to Luke at the beginning of his public preaching, a little later according to Mt and Mk) he decided to go home and preach there.

Mt and Mk simply say he taught in the synagogue there, but Luke tells us that Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah, ch. 61, a passage which talks about someone who will be filled with the Spirit of the

Lord, who will preach good news to the poor, who will free captives and give sight to the blind, etc. Then he sits down and says to his audience: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” In other words, I am this person described here.

All three accounts tell us that at first the audience was astonished at his performance, for after all they know who he is. He is one of them, the son of Joseph the carpenter, himself a carpenter, and his mother and brothers and sisters are still part of their community. But their astonishment quickly turns to anger. They are offended that he, one of them, would now make himself out to be so learned and important. And in Luke’s account Jesus himself adds fuel to the fire, for he goes on to tell them that he will follow the example of the prophets of old, Elisha and Elijah, who worked miracles not for their fellow Jews but for foreigners. That is too much for them. So they try to kill him. But somehow he escapes.

Jesus’ lack of success with his own people in this scene mirrors the overall picture we have of his life. He did not win over the majority of his fellow Jews. The leaders of his people even brought about his death. What does that teach us? If we focus on Luke’s account, we could say that it teaches us not to be xenophobic, that is, hostile to the stranger, the foreigner. In Luke Jesus’ audience

wants him to do for them what he has done for others: “Physician, heal yourself; what we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here also in your own country.” They want to own him. They want him to be their hero. Their claim seems justified to some extent. If he can heal and has done so in other places, why shouldn’t he do it for his own? Such a demand becomes bad only when it becomes exclusive, only when they would want to say to him, “Heal here and nowhere else.” We are not sure that this passage says that. However, it is a possibility. Their call for miracles at home could lead to that position.

But the texts in Mark and Matthew tell us that their call for miracles at home among themselves could not be fulfilled by Jesus. Why? Because they did not believe in him, a fact which, Mark tells us, makes Jesus marvel.

But time is running out, I know. So let us be content with this last thought. Jesus can perform miracles for us if we believe that he can do so. If we don’t believe he can, he can’t. Belief is the key that opens the golden door which keeps the Lord’s miracles safe. No belief, no key, no unlocked door, no miracles. In Mark’s Gospel, ch. 9: 23-24, a man whose son suffers from epilepsy comes to Jesus and says, “. . . if you can do anything, have pity on us and

help us.” Jesus responds, “If you can! All things are possible to him who believes. Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!””

Let that be our default position, not only with respect to the outcome of tonight’s game, but with the outcome of our lives and its individual moments.