

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C

Habakkuk 1: 2-3, 2: 2-4

Psalm 95: 1-2, 6-7, 8-9

2 Timothy 1: 6-8, 13-14

Luke 17: 5-10

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Let's imagine an alien civilization has discovered that there is intelligent life on Earth. They send a scout to learn about us. We'll need a name for the scout. Let's call him Bob. The mission is Bob's first assignment, and he's anxious to do well. He settles his ship into orbit around Earth, chooses a land mass at random and beams down to the surface.

Bob, who is invisible to human eyes, finds himself in the Andes, beside a mountain stream. Wading in the stream is a group of prospectors panning for gold. He walks over to the prospectors and watches them carefully. He observes how they crouch down and scoop some sand and stones from the streambed into a shallow pan. Then they swish the water out of the pan, and examine the residue. They stare intently at the tiny stones at the bottom of the pan. They hold them up to the sun and squint at them. Finally, they dump the contents of the pan back into the water, scoop out more debris from the streambed, and repeat the whole process.

After watching this activity for a while, Bob beams back to his ship to broadcast his first dispatch on a sub-space frequency. "Earthlings," he reports, "are fascinated by wet gravel. They travel long distances from their dwellings in order to acquire wet stones. They examine them intently for long periods. However, as soon as the stones begin to dry,

they lose interest in them, and discard them in favor of other, wetter, gravel.” It seems Bob has missed the point about panning for gold.

Now Bob is ready to gather more information. He again beams down to the Earth’s surface. This time he finds himself in Ohio. Farmers are plowing their fields for the crop of winter wheat. Bob watches them for a while, and then returns to his ship to file another report: “Earthlings have created very elaborate machines to scrape straight lines in the soil. This activity apparently gives them great satisfaction, for they are engaged in scrapping a significant percentage of the planet’s surface in this way.” Bob has missed the point about farming.

Now Bob finds his way into a Catholic parish church, and begins to observe what occurs there. He sees that the large interior space is full of earth people. Some of the people light small flames and watch them intently. Others, very slowly and carefully, count beads that have been tied to a loop of string. (Bob can’t imagine why so much care is necessary. It is perfectly obvious that there are 59 beads on each string.) But the main activity in the building is centered on an elaborately dressed earthling who is apparently describing, at great length, the merits of some food and drink on the table before him. He shows the food and drink to the others, and shares it with them. Bob would be sure to include all of these observations in his next report.

We have to make allowances for Bob. After all, this *is* his first mission. But the fact remains that for all his careful observation, he has failed to realize that there was more to panning for gold than wet gravel, more to farming than scratching straight lines in the dirt, and more to Christianity than flames, and beads, and food and drink.

Let’s say good-bye to our visitor from another planet. It doesn’t

really matter that he was unable to see beneath the surface of things. But it matters very much if we can't see beneath the surface of our religious observances, because just beyond the routine and the ritual is Christ. The goal of our Catholic faith is a transforming vision of Christ that will change forever the way we see the world, and the way we live in it.

As Habakkuk insists, "the vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint; if it delays, wait for it, it will surely come. . . ." Today could be the day. The Psalmist pleads with us, "If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts."

If the surface meaning of things is enough for us, if we are satisfied with meeting our 'Sunday obligations,' we will be able to say to God only "We are useless servants, we have done no more than our duty." But if, as St. Paul urges, we stir into flame the gift of God bestowed on us -- if we wait for and embrace the transforming vision promised us in Christ, we will have faith to uproot sycamores and transplant them in the sea. The Eucharist is a wonderful time and place to begin. It is Jesus' answer to our plea to him to increase our faith.