

St. Vincent de Paul Retreat
26th Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 28, 2008

In this special Pauline Year celebrating the 2000th anniversary of the birth of the great Apostle to the Gentiles I greet you in the style of his Epistles: *Paul, a priest from the United States and lover of Jesus Christ, to all the holy ones in Christ Jesus who are in Altrincham, with your clergy and lay leaders: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

I am filled with love for you all as I stay among you for four days. For the past six months I have been preparing to journey with you on a retreat that celebrates some virtues of your noble patron saint, Vincent de Paul. On this special weekend that marks his feast day I want to open my heart and invite you to make this retreat with me. I have traveled 3800 miles to share with you stories of my love affair with Jesus Christ and to sow some seeds among you for you to renew your call to share the love of Jesus with others. I have left behind an 87-year old mother in the care of my four siblings and a school of 200 children, autistic and mentally challenged, in the care of local priest to be among you. My love for Jesus and my love for you is what drives me to do this. But, I am not here only for you. I am also here for those in the flock who are inactive, who are hurting, who are searching, and who are waiting for us to open our doors and our hearts to welcome them home. St. Vincent de Paul paid attention to the neglected, the lowly, the poor, and the outcast.

For 161 years you have been practicing his virtues and his spirituality as a Catholic community in Altrincham. You were born as the parish of St. Vincent's in 1847. Queen Victoria had been on the throne for ten years. Your new church opened on Oct. 1, 1905, four years after her death in 1901. I am sorry I missed the centennial celebration three years ago. When your church doors opened King Edward VII, who reigned from 1901 to 1910 was the monarch of the British Empire. This information is compliments of GOOGLE.com.

You have been reading about the retreat in bulletin articles the past six weeks. I know because I wrote them. And my HP Pavilion 2000 laptop emailed them to the secretary. For those of you who don't know what HP stands for it has two meanings: in the world of technology it means "Hewlett Packard." In the world of faith it means "Higher Power."

It is the later meaning that will connect us on the retreat. For the next four days I want to paint four portraits of St. Vincent de Paul:

- A man of care giving (Sunday – Mass of Anointing of the Sick)
- A man of simplicity (Monday) following the 12:15 Mass & 7:30 PM
- A man of vision (Tuesday) “ “ “ “ “
- A man of holiness (Wednesday) “ “ “ “ “

These virtues were birthed in him by a God whose dream was to use Vincent to preach the gospel of Jesus to beggars and the rural poor and those victimized by wars and pillaging at the hands of invading nations in 17th century France.

The scripture readings today invite us to think about God's dream for us. Ezekiel's generation felt that their sufferings (the fall of Jerusalem and the Exile into Babylon) were a punishment for the sins of the past generation. Their complaint is unfair. According to Ezekiel it is the sinfulness of the complaining generation that prevents them from seeing how fair God really is. To support his view, Ezekiel cites two examples. The first involves the punishment that befalls an evil person; the second deals with the rewards given to one who is good. What the prophet declares is the responsibility of each person to act with awareness of what the consequences will be. It is a view that Ezekiel inherited from previous generations, but it is spoken in a new way. The prophet holds out the hope of conversion, of turning away from sin, and of turning to God. In the U.S. we have a saying that fits Ezekiel's message: *some people espouse a way of life based upon the philosophy – "ready, fire, aim" while others live according to a philosophy – "ready, aim, fire."* In the words of a wisdom saying; "what you focus on determines what you miss." Ezekiel is trying to get his generation to focus less on complaining and more on conversion. As Albert Einstein once said, *"Everything has changed but our thinking."*

In the gospel reading St. Matthew portrays Jesus as a new Ezekiel. The audience he is trying to change is the chief priests and elders. They are expected to be close to God and, by profession, tax collectors and prostitutes are thought to be far from God. But what is thought to be far from God is "going into the kingdom ahead of" what is thought to be close to God. The reason for this reversal is that when tax collectors and sinners heard John, they repented. They changed their minds and began to live in a new way. But the chief priests and elders did not change their mind. Their resistance is deep.

Leading a life of righteousness is about repenting and not resisting. This is what the first born son in the story does. But, the religious leaders are the second son. They say they are righteous because of what they say but they do not carry through with what they say. Their endorsement of the first son is a judgment on themselves. They are aligned with the second son, and their real failure is that they cannot change their mind.

What Jesus is teaching is relevant for us. Life is about ebb and flow. But the mind always lags behind. It holds onto failures, grudges, insecurities and so it cannot ride the new moments that happen all the time. Therefore to enter into life---the kingdom of God---the mind has to continually change.

There is a wisdom saying: *the mind makes a good servant but a poor master.* When we use all our energy to cling to what we think, there is little energy for

attuning ourselves to the deep rhythms of life that bring us to the redemptive side of our unconverted selves.

St. Vincent de Paul was good at this mission. His preaching, his care giving, his attending to the poor and needy made them feel redeemable. That is my mission as the retreat leader. I am among you as one who sows seeds: seeds of care, seeds of simplicity, seeds of vision and seeds of hope. In return all I ask is that you give God and each other 90 minutes of your time over the next three days.

Tell your mind that you're going to step away from the computer, the emails, the internet, the cell phone, the IPOD, all the multi-tasking and other traps we fall into that keep us from ongoing conversion of life. Gather here to be still and listen to your life speak in quiet, in contemplative song, in scripture stories, in preaching, in witnessing. This is life giving. All the rest is life taking.

During the retreat I will open the book of my life and share some conversion stories with you.

- As a caregiver to my father who died at age 90 in February 2004.
- On the theme of "simplicity" I'll share stories as a consumer who has learned the truth that our economic system masks the buying of things as satisfaction. It is a lie. If we are truly satisfied then we do not need more than we already have.
- On the theme of "holiness" I'll share stories as a sinner whose ego got in God's way and it took a breakdown to change my way of seeing things as God intended me to see them.
- On the theme of "vision" I'll share my parts of my journey as a spiritual director who worked with victims of the clergy sex abuse scandal and by giving my heart to them found a renewed love of God in all victims.

My preaching will weave together scripture stories and these themes from the life of St. Vincent de Paul. I am here as a preacher of good news. There will be some of it here for everyone. All I ask is that you think about how to change your mind and make the retreat so you have new stories to tell about a change of heart. I'll close with what I hope you take as inspiration. 1994 – *"Forrest Gump"* – "Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're going to get." I reframed that line as a retreat director: *"The spiritual life is like a box of chocolates, it's not about what you get, but what you do with what you get."* I'll unpack that wisdom for your spiritual lives during the retreat. If you're thinking, *"that's not fair"* then Isaiah and Jesus and Matthew and St. Paul and St. Vincent de Paul and this Paul have some good news for you during this retreat. My heart can't wait to share it. And my prayer is that you will share it with others. AMEN.