

Divine Mercy Parish – Singapore
Triduum Mass – Friday Oct. 4, 2012
Baruch 1:15-22 & Luke 10: 13-16

My homeland, the United States of America, gets a lot of media coverage about our gun massacres. They have become so frequent that the shame is now global. The gun lobby is very powerful. The National Rifle Association wields great influence in Congress. Many of our legislators sell their souls to the lobby to buy votes for their election and re-election. The irony is that only 5% of Americans who own guns are members of the NRA so their power as a lobby far outweighs their constituency.

The recent massacre at the Navy Yard in Washington, D.C. involved a former War veteran. Aaron Alexis indiscriminately opened fire on co-workers on Mon. Sept. 16 killing twelve innocent people with a high-powered rifle. It was the nineteenth massacre during President Obama's five years in office. What a shameful stain on his record. As always, the NRA never expressed any compassion for the victims. To do that would betray their mission to uphold the second amendment to the Constitution, namely, the right to bear arms. It was added on Dec. 15, 1791 to support rights of self-defense, and the civic duty to act in defense of the country. Two hundred and twenty-two years later, only God knows how many Americans have died from our addiction to gun violence. It is more than enough to tweak the moral issue of abortion in the context of political correctness.

During the investigation into the shooter's background it was discovered that he reported to a medical officer recently that he had been hearing voices in his head. Without the proper treatment those voices dominated his behavior and turned him into a killer. They were voices of darkness, anger, confusion.

"Voices" is a power word in the readings for this feast of St. Francis of Assisi. God has something to say today about how the voices of shame, sinfulness and conversion are integral to the story of our salvation. And how we engage those voices determines how we cooperate with God in writing new chapters in that ongoing story.

I am not talking about the voices we use to speak to one another. Everyone's voice has a different texture, a different pitch, a different tone. We use different inflexion with our voices. We color words differently. We express either excitement or sadness in our voices depending on the level of animation that drives our words. No one voice is the same.

No, I am talking about the inner voices that speak to us as people with an interior life. Voices that we listen to that either lead us on the path of wholeness or brokenness, the path of forgiveness or the path of revenge, the path of trust or the path of fear, the path of hope or the path of despair, the path of peace or the path of anger.

Let's step into these biblical stories and find ourselves in them. Let the stories confront us, stretch us, convert us again so that the God in these stories can be reclaimed again as the God in our stories of sinfulness, shame and conversion.

Baruch, author of the first reading, was the secretary to the great pre-exilic prophet, Jeremiah. I bet you never knew that prophets had secretaries. I bet you never knew they were paid more than the minimum wage, namely, *you do God's work; you get God's pay*. Did it ever occur to you that there was a prophetic Word long before there was Microsoft Word? Okay, my imagination might be stretching that abit.

In these few verses from his book, we hear a public confession of sins that expresses the guilt of the whole Jewish nation before God at the time of the Babylonian exile in 587BC. This confession appears in a letter the exiled Jews in Babylon reportedly sent to the few countrymen their enemies had left behind in Palestine. The exiles humbly acknowledge that God is punishing his chosen people for their sins.

And what are their sins: not heeding the **voice of the Lord**. They heeded other voices, like arrogance, pride, selfishness, envy, and jealousy just to name a few. These voices which we listen to with our heart more than our ears, created static inside with the voice of the God who took pity on them, liberated them from slavery, led them through the desert and gave them a land flowing with milk and honey. This inner static, created by the humble voice of God conflicting with the voice of pride in the people, confused them, and turned them away from being obedient to being disobedient to the Lord. The fruit of those nasty voices dominating their lives led to their downfall and their eventual exile. It became a life changing lesson about the meaning of the voices you give your heart to as a People of God.

But, the good news about being in exile is that they were purified of those tricky voices, they grew to discern again how to listen to the voice of God, to the words of the prophets and to acquire a new desire to replace their wicked hearts with converted hearts. The communal expression of their guilt, in this reading, opens the doors for the mercy of God to flow again into their lives like a new river of rebirth. And their homecoming is sealed. It took fifty years. So, if you are impatient about someone taking their time to have a conversion and come home to Divine Mercy parish then learn a lesson of what it means to be patient with the slow work of God.

In the gospel, Jesus is not as penitent as Baruch. His voice is full of rebuke for the citizens of three towns near the Sea of Galilee for not heeding his call to repent for their sinful lives. And what is their sin: rejecting Jesus as the Messiah of God. Deleting Jesus as the voice of the one who sent him to save the world.

Because they refuse to repent, to sit in sackcloth and ashes as Tyre and Sidon did long before, the judgment upon them will be harsh. The voice dominating their lives is the voice of arrogance and stubbornness. Jesus offers the voice of repentance and conversion. It creates too much static for them and they can't surrender and allow his voice to dominate.

Today, we celebrate a saint who was a conflicted man. You know his story. Francis of Assisi began life as the son of a wealthy cloth merchant. The early chapters of his life were spent in frivolous enjoyments. The voices that ruled his heart were carelessness, merriment, foolishness, drunkenness, troublemaking, and other abusive behaviors. Then, conflict entered his life. War, captivity and sickness turned his heart from worldly ambitions. New inner voices began to grab his heart and attention. A breakthrough occurred when he risked kissing a leper. Then he began emptying his father's warehouse to give to the poor. Finally, he stripped off his own clothes and vowed to only recognize no other father but God in heaven.

As he began to repair a small church he attracted followers, launching a new religious order, the Friars Minor. In their strict faithfulness to the gospel – seeking out the poor, the sick, the homeless, embracing poverty and nonviolence – they turned the values of their society upside down. You know the rest of the story. When Jesus became the dominant voice in his life, Francis became the end of the story of God having the last word in his life.

That story has taken a surprising turn in our century. Now another Francis sits on the throne of Peter. Not a Franciscan, but a Jesuit; a humble Cardinal Archbishop from Buenos Aires, Argentina. Instead of making fashion statements, he smiles. Instead of issuing a list of do's and don'ts he opens his arms to show the mercy and compassion of God. We have not yet heard much of his voice, of what it sounds like, of its inflections and color, because he speaks more with gestures, and outreach and his eyes.

The story of Francis of Assisi becoming a new chapter in God's story in 1182-1226 is unfolding in Francis of Argentina becoming a new chapter in our church's story in 2013. I am buoyed by his simplicity, humbled by his approachability and inspired by his proclivity to defuse and use tensions as a vessel of divine compassion.

Cut from the mold of Baruch, I see him as a voice of hope melting shame for focusing too much on the wrong things these past few years to the exclusion of hurting and alienated souls. Cut from the mold of Jesus of Nazareth, I see him rebuking with kindness and welcoming home the lost with compassion. Cut from the mold of St. Francis I see him repairing and rebuilding the Church in a new and profound way.

Whenever a priest uses his voice to invoke the name of Pope Francis in the Eucharistic Prayer may a voice awaken in you a desire to join him in the new task of rebuilding our Church by putting your face of welcome and your voice of compassion to this mission.

That is the seed of the word of God I sow in you today for this second Triduum Mass. It is a new day in our lives, in our church and in the ongoing vocation of cooperating with God who is always exalted when we become the end of the story of God having the last word in our story.

Amen.