

Catholics at the Capitol  
Homily for Tuesday for Sixth Week in Ordinary Time  
February 13, 2007

Scriptures: Genesis 6; Mark 8:14-21

Once again it is my privilege and joy to preach at this Mass and to thank all of you who have gathered here at the Capitol from around the Commonwealth to participate in these two very important days. In the names of Archbishop Kelly and Bishops McRaith and Foys, I want to tell you that we really are grateful for your presence here and that the church really needs you to be involved in making our voice heard in the public square of our Commonwealth. Also on behalf of the other bishops and in my own name, I want to thank the staff of the Catholic Conference of Kentucky and the associated offices of the Kentucky League for Educational Alternatives and Opportunities for Life for all the work they have done in preparation for this program. I also want to thank on behalf of all the other bishops all our presenters, especially Dick Dowling.

I invite you to listen to these words from Pope Benedict taken from *Deus Caritas Est*, his first encyclical that describes the essential place of love in the life of the Church and how the Church must express love through acts of justice and charity. Pope Benedict has written:

“Building a just social and civil order, wherein each person receives what is his or her due, is an essential task which every generation must take up anew. As a political task, this cannot be the Church’s immediate responsibility. Yet, since it is also an important human responsibility, the Church is duty-bound to offer, through the purification of reason and through ethical formation, her own specific contribution towards understanding the requirements of justice and achieving them politically.

The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet, at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sideline for the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper. A just society must be the achievement of politics, not of the Church. Yet the promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good is something that concerns the Church deeply.” (no. 28)

I am so proud to say that our assembly here in Frankfort is a concrete expression that we are deeply concerned with the truths which Pope Benedict so

eloquently describes in his encyclical. Your presence here indicates that you are not indifferent nor are you willing to remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. Your presence represents part of that sacrifice that you are willing to make so that justice can prevail and prosper in our state. You are men and women who are willing to assume that most important human responsibility which is enriched through our faith in Jesus Christ to contribute to our society's understanding of the requirements of justice and achieving that justice politically. The Holy Father warns us to recognize the fundamentally different responsibilities of Church and State, all the while emphasizing that developing and sustaining a just civil society is a work that must deeply and concern involve the community of faith.

Our gathering here in our capitol city is one very effective expression of your rightful and necessary engagement in public affairs. Because of our baptism and confirmation we are each obliged to embrace the priestly, prophetic and shepherding mission of Christ and His Church. Our Catholic Faith urges us to promote the common good in society, to defend the dignity of every human person and to be faithful citizens to the best of our ability.

I would like to offer a brief reflection on these obligations of promoting the common good, defending human dignity and being faithful citizens through a reflection on the venerable figure presented to us today in the Liturgy of the Word.

You know, as well as I, that many humorous stories and jokes have been spun off of the biblical story of Noah and the flood. I remember well the anecdote which describes a religion teacher asking her class what was the name of Noah's wife. With great confidence one student responded without hesitation, "Joan of Ark." You have also probably heard one of the many versions of the story that said that Noah could never build God's ark in today's society. It would be impossible given all of the licenses, permits and government regulations that would require compliance. It was good for the human race that God gave the command to Noah before all of these government-imposed obstacles were invented.

What I would like to offer is a brief reflection on this curious figure and suggest that his virtues which are hinted at in the Genesis narrative are gifts of grace that would serve us well in our task of advocacy affecting the course of public policy here in Frankfort. Let us consider for a brief while this ancient fellow, Noah.

The biblical author introduces us to Noah only after making some startling, disturbing observations. Our first reading told us that "When the Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on earth and how no desire that his heart conceived was ever anything but evil, He regretted that he had made man on

the earth and His heart was grieved." God's response to this relentless spread of evil among His good creation which had now penetrated to the very heart of His greatest creative achievement, human beings, was simply to wipe from the face of the earth the creatures whom he had created. The only ray of hope in this bleak scenario is the simple verse: "But Noah found favor with the Lord."

What sort of person builds a boat at the command of a God he cannot see? Did it matter to Noah that no one else dared build an ark where there seemed to be absolutely no need for an ark?

After Noah built the ark to God's specifications, the Lord commands him to herd onto the ark seven pairs of every clean animal. Although it is not explicit in the text we can conclude then that Noah was the first person in history and the only person since that time who was able "to herd cats" – fourteen of them, in fact, onto the ark. But what are the real, the deeper qualities that can be helpful to us in our task of bringing Catholic social justice principles to bear effectively on the formation of public policy in the land?

First, Noah was a man who saw what others did not see; heard what others did not hear; looked where others did not look. He thought things others did not dare to ponder. He took risks and planned and acted; no matter what anyone thought or said. What sort of man is Noah? The word "eccentric" comes to mind. The man is building a boat, the first of its kind, on dry land in anticipation of a phenomenon that had never occurred before in nature. Moreover, he is cooped up in cramped quarters with his wife and three sons and their wives, not to speak of a boatload of animals. God could anticipate Noah's cooperation in these bizarre requests because the biblical author tells us God said to Noah "for you alone in this age have I found to be truly just." The author of the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews records that Noah was a just and faithful man, so much so that he is listed in the Bible's "Who's Who" of faith heroes in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews because Noah trusted God, pouring his time, efforts and resources into what God asked of him.

Noah was also a risk-taker, a man who wagered his reputation, his wealth and all that he had on an idea – a conviction that it is healthier and better to listen to what God says, than not to listen. Noah's character was strong enough to endure ridicule, name-calling and derision. He must have had a high tolerance for public embarrassment. But even this awkwardness could not dissuade him from doing what God had asked. Here I am reminded of one of my favorite sayings of Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta. She would often say: "We have to be willing to do the ridiculous, so that God can do the miraculous." Noah did what appeared to be ridiculous – and received ridicule – and God did the miraculous.

Noah living in an unrighteous time was able to make good choices, instead of succumbing to the wickedness of his day. It is always hard to be righteous and counter cultural. It is as difficult now as it was then to choose God and to stick with God no matter what. It is as difficult now as it was then to base our lives on the truths God has revealed to us and abide in those truths whatever the cost.

Frequently the ark is pictured as a primitive, wooden version of the QE-II. Actually it is described in Genesis as a floating tub, a sort of floating box without any steering mechanism or any means of control. Noah was not the captain of this ark by any sense of the term. It was not made to sail. After all there was no place to sail! In the ark the people and the animals are entirely at the mercy of God and cannot direct or save themselves. He simply entrusted himself and his family and cargo of livestock completely into God's hands. When you live your life with that kind of graced trust in God, you can deal with just about anything.

From the earliest times our Christian forbearers recognized in the ark a symbol of the Church – a mystery which we humans do not control or ultimately direct; a transcendent reality by which we place ourselves into the hands of God. Our forbearers also recognized in these flood waters that were simultaneously a means of destruction and salvation a symbol of Christian baptism. We who have experienced those baptismal waters have died and have been raised to new life in Christ.

All of us gathered here for our annual Catholics at the Capitol can, I believe, draw some very helpful inspiration at these virtues hinted at in the biblical narrative.

Fidelity to Christ and to the social justice teachings God has given us through the Church's magisterium requires fidelity and the willingness to be risk takers. The works of advocacy for the sake of justice requires women and men to see what others often times do not see; to hear what others don't hear; to be willing to look where others many times do not want to look. Like Noah, the challenge before us is not simply to avoid succumbing to the evils of our age but to let God use us as instruments for salvation, as agents through whom he can set right that which has gone wrong. Whether or not others are willing to see, to hear, to ponder from new perspectives the issues of immigration, affordable housing, education, health and welfare, the inviolability of human life, the death penalty, we must. In today's Gospel passage, Jesus warned His disciples and us about eyes that are unseeing and ears that do not hear.

Like Noah, we realize that even our best, most effective and most consistent efforts alone cannot save the world. In the Eucharist that we are celebrating we entrust ourselves to God's plan. We remember that the final result of these efforts as indeed the final results of all our efforts are in the hands of God. It is so

important to remember this when we are a distinctly minority position and the desired result seems often to elude us. It is in these seemingly hopeless circumstances that we can provide a faithful witness in the public square – a faithful witness that God can use to touch hearts and minds in ways that may not always be apparent or visible to the naked eye. You will have no idea, perhaps, what affect your words and presence will have tomorrow morning on the legislators with whom you meet and speak. But God already sees the outcome and He can use you to touch hearts and change minds in ways that are simply not known and not expected tonight.

Once again, Pope Benedict's words in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* remind us so clearly of this truth:

“There are times when the burden of need and our own limitations might tempt us to become discouraged. But precisely then we are helped by the knowledge that, in the end, we are only instruments in the Lord's hands: and this knowledge frees us from the presumption of thinking that we alone are personally responsible for building a better world. In all humility we will do what we can, and in all humility, we will entrust the rest to the Lord.” (no. 35)

We are not expected to save the world. Christ has done that for us already. But we are charged with working for change so that the presence of the Kingdom of God can be more apparent. We can mediate Christ's presence in a world desperate for His love and his truth. In this Eucharist and in these hours we spend together as Catholics at the Capitol we should be more convinced than ever that as members of Christ's Body and in union with Christ our head, our actions can have far reaching consequences in touching and changing minds and hearts.