

2018 30TH SUNDAY

The story is told of how in England at a Parish Mass beginning the month of May a little girl was carefully schooled to come forward, climb a low step ladder and, in front of the whole Congregation, to place a crown of flowers on the head of a statue of Mary.

At the proper moment the girl came forward and climbed the step ladder but in leaning forward to place the flowers on Mary's head, lost her balance and bumped the statue. It crashed to the floor of the Church, shattering into a hundred pieces. The little girl did not fall. She just froze on the steps of the ladder; horror-stricken.

The Church was eerily quiet. It was a statue precious to the Parish.

And then a nun from the front row dashed to the youngster, took her in her arms and said good and loudly, "Don't worry sweet-heart. That statue was old and dirty. It was time for us to get a new one."

And the whole Congregation stood and applauded, smiling and looking happy.

That was a Spirit-filled Parish.

A sure sign that a Parish is Spirit-filled is whether or not the people who make up the Parish are people of Joy- no matter how grim life may actually be.

Jeremiah has a reputation for being a prophet of gloom. Yet in today's 1st Reading he is anything but.

In those terrible years of exile and persecution in Babylon he is able to say to the People of Israel: "Shout with joy! Hail the Chief of the Nations! Proclaim! Praise! Shout out loud- 'The Lord has saved His People in the past and He will do so again.' 'Yes'- the Lord says to us- 'I am your Father and you are my first-born children.' "

There is no place for gloom or for pessimism. God is alive and lives among us.

When the blind beggar Bartimaeus cried out to Jesus: 'Son of David, Jesus, have pity on me,' some among the people- true kill-joys- tried to silence him. The man was an embarrassment. He was spoiling things for them. In his dirty, tattered cloak, with his ugly, sightless eyes, he was a loathsome presence to them. He sounded like a crippled magpie as he squawked out his desperate plea.

These people tried to kill his hope. And to his credit Bartimaeus ignored them.

Jesus heard Bartimaeus and called the blind man to come to Him. Stumbling and groping Bartimaeus rushed to Jesus. He threw aside his precious cloak to get to Jesus all the sooner because he knew- deep down inside- that he would be healed of his blindness and it would be easy to find his cloak again after the miracle.

Jesus did not make Bartimaeus beg. He knew that Bartimaeus had had enough of begging. Gently Jesus touched Bartimaeus' ugly eyes and the scales began to fall from them- light slowly began to filter through. As his eyes began to focus, the first thing that Bartimaeus would have seen would have been Jesus' radiantly- smiling, joy-filled face. He then heard the words: "Go on your way- it was your faith that saved you."

What wondrous joy there is in this scene! Bartimaeus had felt Jesus' divine love even before he could see him. It was as if he- Bartimaeus- was the sole object of that love.

Please God those gloomy onlookers were also filled with joy and praised God for His mercy to Bartimaeus.

St. Paul- no stranger to conflict, imprisonment and moments of discouragement tells us in his Letter to the Romans (14:17) that Joy is a sure sign that a community is part of God's Kingdom. Conversely where there is gloom, pessimism, bickering and back-stabbing a community is far from being a part of God's Kingdom.

In 1981 a community of Irish Holy Faith Sisters, who ran Fa'asa'o Girls' High School, were my neighbours in American Samoa. Fifteen years earlier they had come to the Island full of hope that many young woman would be inspired by them to become Holy Faith Sisters. Yet they had not had one vocation; not one. Earlier in the year a fund-raising Malaga to Hawaii involving the School cultural group had been a disaster and the School was now even worse in debt. The PTA and the School Board were blaming each other and the nuns and the Church for the fiasco in Hawaii. It was all very bitter and twisted. The nuns were profoundly discouraged and wondered what the deuce they were doing there in American Samoa.

The Mother General of the Sisters arrived on the Island and the Sisters closed the School for three days to have time alone with her. Even I was

barred! At the end of the three days I popped around to see how things were; for I was concerned about them and they were close friends. I asked Sister Bernadette what Mother Superior General had said to them. She said: “Frank, she really stuck it to us because of our gloom and doom. She told us, over and over, that our role on the Island was to be ‘Prophets of Joyful Hope’.

Mother Superior General could be speaking to all Catholics.

In this confused, angry world- we as Catholics are nothing if we, too, are not Prophets of Joyful hope.

Look at the bulk of news reporting in our papers and on TV News- there is so much cynicism, so little hope, so few reasons for us to be joyful.

Yet we as Christians have every reason to be joyful. God is alive- part of our lives- present in our suffering- comforting us, encouraging us- like the nun holding that girl in the Church, like Jesus healing blind Bartimaeus. God comes to us in our times of discouragement and blesses us with His Holy Spirit- enabling us to go forward with joy and confidence; even though the sufferings may continue. Bartimaeus may well have remained a beggar but as a follower of Jesus he was a beggar filled with joy and hope.

Listen once again to the words of our beautiful 1st Reading- they are words addressed to each one of us: “Shout with joy, you Catholics of Gisborne. Praise! Proclaim! I will guide you to streams of water; you will not stumble. For I am your Father and you are my first-born children.”

God dwells within us and loves us tenderly. How can we not but be prophets of joyful hope!