

# The Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Hosea 2:16-20
<i>Response</i>	The Lord is kind and merciful.
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalms 103:1-2, 3-4, 8, 10, 12-13
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Corinthians 3:1-6
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	He willed to give us birth by the word of truth that we may be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 2:18-22

The 8th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year B continues the Church's journey through the Gospel of Mark, bringing us to Chapter 2, the famous exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees about his disciples' failure to fast, or their lack of practicing fasting I should say. So this is a really important text because in it Jesus uses the imagery of the bridegroom, a parable about the bridegroom to refer to himself and his disciples. So let's see what happens, Chapter 2, verse 18 says:

Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; if he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; if he does, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but new wine is for fresh skins."<sup>1</sup>

The first thing I want to tell you about this passage is the context of conflict over fasting. So it's really clear from the text that there are two groups known for

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

their piety, known for their fidelity and their zeal for practicing their religion. And one of them is of course the disciples of John the Baptist and the others are the disciples of the Pharisees. So, in Judaism at the time of Jesus there were different parties, there were different groups that were known for their more intense practice of the Jewish faith. So, for example, John the Baptist lived a radical life of asceticism out in the desert. He gathers certain followers to him and they were known for practicing fasting, for abstaining from food for certain set periods of time. We don't know the exact details of that.

The other group is the Pharisees. The Pharisees, their their name comes from a Hebrew word that means “separated one”, *Perushim*, and they were known also for their rigorous fidelity to the law and to the practices of the law, especially their reverence and respect for the traditions of the elders, for the traditions of the Jewish people. Although the Pharisees are often negatively depicted in the gospels, because they come into conflict with Jesus, Josephus tells us that at the time of Jesus, in the 1st century, the Pharisees were actually the most respected of the various religious movements by the common people, precisely because they were known for being faithful to the law and they were also known for teaching the people. So, the synagogues throughout the land of Israel were often led by Pharisees, who would teach the people about how to live lives of holiness. The Pharisees were, in effect, a lay holiness movement in early Judaism in the 1st century AD. Sometimes we assume the Pharisees were priests, but they are actually not. They're lay people who are just devoted to following the law and to being faithful to the law and to living lives of purity and holiness of the kind that might be expected of priests. But they're applying it to the people

So the Pharisees are known for fasting. The disciples of John the Baptist are known for fasting. So Jesus of Nazareth comes on the scene. He's gathering students around him. He's a rabbi. He's teaching them. But unlike the disciples of John and unlike the disciples of the Pharisees, people recognize, “hey, Jesus’ disciples, they don't fast. They're not practicing fasting.” Or at least they're not fasting in a publicly visible enough way for other people to see it, right? Because we are going to know from the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus is going to call his disciples to practice secret fasting. So that is going to be part of it. But at this point Jesus confirms that they're not fasting. But what he does is he responds to the question, Why don't your disciples fast? Instead of giving a straight answer, right? My disciples don't fast because “X”, Jesus does what he loves to do. He gives a parable. He poses a Riddle. He poses a question that's meant to both arrest the attention of his audience and also get them to think for

themselves about what the answer might be and who he is and who his disciples are.

So here's the parable. Here's the Riddle of the bridegroom. When they ask him, why don't you disciples fast? Jesus says:

Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.

So this Riddle of the bridegroom presupposes a certain amount of knowledge of ancient Jewish wedding customs in order for it to kind of make sense. So if you want to go into this in a little more depth, I wrote a book called *Jesus the Bridegroom: The Greatest Love Story Ever Told*, which is about Jesus' identity as bridegroom, as well as his passion and death from a 1st century Jewish perspective and in light of ancient Jewish wedding customs regarding the bridegroom, the bride and the wedding. And in that book I have a more detailed treatment of the Gospel for today. For our purposes here, I just want to make a couple of points about ancient Jewish weddings. So the first thing I would say here is that the parable Jesus is using is meant to be correlated with himself and his disciples. So in the parable, Jesus is comparing himself to the bridegroom. The disciples he is comparing to the wedding guests. Now, that's the Revised Standard Version translation. Literally, what the Greek says is the "sons of the bride chamber" or the "sons of the bridal chamber." This is a technical expression that likely does not refer to all of the guests of the wedding, but to the ancient Jewish equivalent of what we would call the groomsmen. In other words, these were men who were chosen by the bridegroom, who were friends of the bridegroom. They were close to the bridegroom, and they played a key role in the ancient wedding ceremony.

So, for example, in certain passages we see that the bride is carried in procession to the bridal chamber where the bridegroom and the bride will then consummate the marriage. The sons of the bride chamber are likely the the friends of the bridegroom who would carry, for example, the bride in procession into the bridal chamber. We don't have a ton of evidence on ancient Jewish weddings, so some of it is a little speculative, but that's the likely meaning of sons of the bride chamber. If you want an example of that, in John 3, John the Baptist, you might recall, uses a riddle also to refer to himself when they ask if he's the Christ. And he says the friend of the bridegroom rejoices at the voice of the bridegroom

when he hears him coming. So John compares himself to one of these sons of the bride chamber, but he calls them the friend of the bridegroom. There's a Hebrew term for this called the *shoshben*. He was a special groomsman, basically the ancient Jewish equivalent of the best man, right? He was the man who was closest to the bridegroom. So John says, I'm the friend of the bridegroom, Christ is the bridegroom, and just like the best man decreases and the groom increases in the wedding ceremony...like the best man might give a speech at the supper the night before, but when you get to the wedding, the groom is going to be the center of it, the groom and the bride. So too, John the Baptist is saying I'm like the friend of the bridegroom, I'm here to announce his coming, but he's going to increase and I'm going to decrease.

Okay, so that's the background to Jesus' imagery here. So he's saying, implicitly, he's the bridegroom, the disciples are the sons of the bride chamber, they're the groomsmen and then the wedding is going to be the day where the bridegroom is taken away. And what Jesus is saying is during the wedding feast, the groomsmen don't fast. Now in order to understand that, it's important to recall that in Judaism at the time of Jesus, a wedding was not just a single day. A wedding would last for a whole week. It would last for seven days. So, for example., you can see if you go back, just to take one example, to the Book of Genesis 29:26-27, we have the story of the wedding of Jacob and Rachel—probably the most famous love story in the Old Testament, because Jacob's the father of Israel. Rachel is his beloved bride. And of course, Jacob gets, as my Mawmaw would have said, he gets bamboozled by Rachel's father. He gets tricked by Laban, his uncle, into marrying Leah, the older sister, instead of Rachel, whom he loved. And if you look in Genesis 29:26, after the switcheroo is done and Jacob realizes what has happened, Laban kind of tries to explain himself by saying, “[oh I'm sorry, did I fail to mention] It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the first-born. Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.” Okay, so the week. What week is that? It's the marriage week. It's the wedding week. So there would be 7 days of celebration for his marriage to Leah and then he will marry Rachel and have another week long wedding celebration. And then the price he will pay is another seven years of labor to his trickster uncle, and now father-in-law, Laban. So that's just an example. There are others as well, Judges 14. You can see that the wedding festivity will last for a whole week.

So, if we take that back to what Jesus is saying here in the Gospel Mark, he presumes his Pharisaic Jewish contemporaries are going to know that during a

wedding the groomsmen, during the seven days of the wedding festival, the groomsmen do not fast. Nobody's fasting at a wedding. And that's a truth that is not only true of ancient Judaism, but today as well. I have yet to go to a wedding where the groomsmen are fasting. They usually swing to the other extreme. Usually it's drinking and drunkenness that can be a problem at a wedding, not fasting. Okay, so Jesus uses that kind of universal human experience to say the groomsman can't fast while the bridegroom is with him, but on the day he's taken away they'll fast. Now what day is that? Again, as I show my book, *Jesus the Bridegroom*, that would be a reference to the wedding night or to the night of consummation, when the bride and the groom would be united in wedlock and they would ratify the promises that had been made verbally in the exchange of vows at betrothal. So a Jewish wedding had two stages to it. There would be the legal marriage through exchange of vows and then there would be the wedding celebration where the couple would actually consummate the marriage and move in together and live in the house. And there were customarily, according to ancient rabbis, there was a year at least between the the betrothal, which meant they were legally married, and then the consummation of the marriage, the celebration of the wedding and the entry of the bride and bridegroom into a home together.

So what Jesus appears to be implying here is that during the wedding celebration itself, the groomsmen don't fast, but once the bridegroom is taken away from them, that would be the night of consummation, the groomsmen would, so to speak, "lose" their friend to marriage, right? He would enter irrevocably into a relationship with his wife and they would start a family together. Only after he was taken away from them would they fast. So in context then, Jesus is making one more riddle, and this is a powerful one. He's basically comparing his own death, his own passion, where he's taken away from the disciples and crucified, to the wedding day, when a groom would be taken away from the groomsmen and united to his bride on the wedding day, the night of consummation. So only then will the groomsmen fast, He says. The parable then points forward to his crucifixion as the time when the disciples will begin to fast. But they're not going to fast now during His public ministry, because He's the bridegroom, they're the groomsman, and He's still with them. They're in the time of celebration now, like the time of the wedding.

Why does that matter at all? Well, one one reason it matters is because by telling this parable of the bridegroom and the groomsmen and the wedding day, Jesus explicitly, once again, in the Gospel of Mark, begins to reveal his divinity. Not explicitly, but implicitly, because in Jewish scripture, in the Old Testament, it is

God Himself who is repeatedly depicted as the Divine Bridegroom, and you actually see this very clearly if you look at the Old Testament reading for today. If you go back to the Old Testament, The Book of Hosea, the Prophet Hosea, Chapter 2, the first reading for today is from Hosea 2:16 and following. So turn that with me for just a moment. This is a famous passage in which the prophet Hosea retells the story of the exodus from Egypt, uses imagery of the exodus from Egypt, but to describe a love story between God and Israel and how Israel is the bride, the Lord God is the bridegroom, and Israel has been unfaithful to her spouse. She's been unfaithful to God through her idolatry and her sin. But God promises that He's going to renew their marital covenant and take her back to himself in this new covenantal relationship at the time of a future exodus, a new exodus in the age of salvation. So if you look, a quick review here. This is from Hosea 2:16-20. We read these words:

“In that day,” declares the Lord,  
“you will call me ‘my husband’;  
you will no longer call me ‘my master.’  
I will remove the names of the Baals from her lips;  
no longer will their names be invoked.  
In that day I will make a covenant for them  
with the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky  
and the creatures that move along the ground.  
Bow and sword and battle  
I will abolish from the land,  
so that all may lie down in safety.  
I will betroth you to me forever;  
I will betroth you in righteousness and justice,  
in love and compassion.  
I will betroth you in faithfulness,  
and you will acknowledge the Lord.

Beautiful passage. Okay, so notice what it's saying there. He's talking about a future age of redemption and salvation in which Israel is no longer going to refer to God as her Baal, but as her husband. Now the word Baal is a polyvalent word, it means more than thing. It can mean master, but it can also mean lord, and it's also one of the names of the gods of the Canaanites, right? The Baals. Over and over in the Old Testament, you'll hear that Israel will chase after the Baals, the gods of the Canaanites, the pagan deities in the falling into idolatry. So God here is saying, you are no longer going to talk about my Baal, my

master, my false god. You are going to talk about me and you are going to call me my husband, and you will call me your husband. Baal, I forgot to mention by the way, was a title that women would address their husbands as. They would call their husband my master, or my Baal. So multiple meanings to this word, and God says I don't want you to call me my Baal, my master. I want you to call me my husband. And you will call me husband when I remove the names of the Baals — now it's the other meaning, the false gods — from your mouth, so that you make mention of them no more and I'm going to betroth you to me. I'm going to enter into a marriage with you, and this marriage is going to be one of righteousness and justice and steadfast love and mercy. I'm going to betroth you to me in fidelity and you shall know the Lord.

So there's another image here. Whenever you see the language of knowing God, on the one hand it means to know him, like intellectually, to have knowledge of him. But on the other hand, it means to enter into intimate communion with him in a nuptial communion, a nuptial mystery that's not unlike, or alludes to, I should say, the kind of language you see of Adam and Eve, right? We'll say Adam knew his wife Eve to describe their marital union, and so that same imagery gets picked up by the Prophets in these nuptial passages, where they are giving an allegory of God's relation to Israel. And what God is basically promising to do here is to wed himself to the people, to forgive their infidelity, to betroth them to him in a new and everlasting covenant that will be characterized by faithfulness and justice and righteousness and mercy. Effectively it's a prophecy of a new exodus, but a new exodus described as a new wedding, a new marriage, a new restored covenant with his people, Israel.

That background then explains the Responsorial Psalm for today, Psalm 103, which talks about how the Lord is a God of mercy. Because Israel, how many acts of infidelity does Israel commit in the Old Testament? How many acts of idolatry do the people of Israel commit in Old Testament? Too many for me to count, right? Nevertheless, God's promise to them is that He is going to show mercy to them in the future. He's not going to abandon his spouse, he's going to betroth her to him, even though she's been unfaithful, in righteousness and justice and mercy, so that they will know the Lord and not just as their master, but as their husband. That's the background to Jesus' parable. So if the God of Israel is revealed as the bridegroom in the Old Testament, and now Jesus is taking that same image and applying it to himself in the New Testament. What is he doing? He's implicitly revealing the mystery of his divinity. He's implicitly revealing the mystery of his divine identity and the nature of his mission. That his mission isn't just to come into the world as the Messiah, or even as the

suffering servant who atones for the sins of humanity, but to enter into an eternal, everlasting, nuptial covenant with the Church, who will be his bride. And of course, that's going to get developed later on in the theology of St. Paul, above all in Ephesians 5, who will say Christ loved the Church and gave himself for the Church like a bridegroom for his bride. That nuptial theology of the mystery of Christ and the Church.

Which again, if you want to look into it, I would highly encourage you to take a look at my book, *Jesus the Bridegroom*. This is an important and central mystery in the Christian faith. We can sometimes forget about, like many Christians will know, oh yeah, of course, Christ is the bridegroom and the Church is the bride and that kind of thing. It's like an allegory. But put yourself in the shoes of the Pharisees who first brought this up. When Christ compares himself to the bridegroom, that's going to be a puzzle. It's going to be a riddle, because the one thing Jesus is very obviously lacking is a wife. And so when he talks about himself as the bridegroom, he's not talking about an ordinary bridegroom. When he talks about the disciples, the Church, collectively as his bride, he doesn't mean an ordinary bride. And when he talks about the day the bridegroom is taken away as his wedding day, there's not going to be an ordinary wedding, because his wedding day is going to be the Paschal Mystery itself. His passion and his death on the cross.

And you can see this if you actually turn to the living tradition. So let's look at St. Augustine. There's a quote from one of St. Augustine's sermons that I actually have in my book, *Jesus the bridegroom*, that I quoted. It really blew me away when I discovered it. This is what he says, St. Augustine:

“Like a bridegroom Christ went forth from his nuptial chamber... He came even to the marriage-bed of the cross, and there, ascending it, he consummated a marriage. And when he sensed the creature sighing in her breath, he surrendered himself to torment for his bride in a communication of love.”<sup>2</sup>

In other words, perhaps more than any early Church Father, Augustine returns over and over again to the nuptial mystery of Christ as the Bridegroom and the Church as the bride. It's one of his favorite themes to reflect upon, on the wedding day of the Crucifixion. The marriage bed of the cross is the image that he uses here because the cross is above all where Christ expresses his love for

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<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *Sermo Suppositus* 120:3.



the Church by laying down his life for the Church. It's where Christ unites himself to the Church by offering his body, by offering his blood, for the sake of the Church and for the sake of her salvation. And this is something that, again, sometimes in the West—although you have Augustine, who is a Doctor of the Church, clearly emphasizes the nuptial mystery—we can sometimes forget it in the Roman Catholic Church, just because we're maybe not as familiar with the imagery. But when I was doing lectures on this years ago, one of my Eastern Catholic friends pointed out that if you look in the East, there's a very popular icon of Christ called Christ the Bridegroom. And if you look for images, there are lots of variations of images of this particular icon, but Christ the Bridegroom is an image of Christ with his hands bound and holding the reed, some images will have the reed, it will be of him in his passion, of him preparing for his crucifixion. It's an image of Christ wearing the crown of thorns on the way to the cross, standing and preparing to offer himself for his bride. And you might think, oh, Christ the bridegroom, the image should be of him maybe dressed like a bridegroom or at a wedding feast. Well, no, because the day on which Christ unites himself to his bride, his wedding day, so to speak, is the day of Calvary. It's the day of the crucifixion. In the Holy Land, if you go to the traditional site of Christ's crucifixion, Calvary, there is a famous icon of Christ the Bridegroom at the site of his death. So why would you put an icon of Christ the Bridegroom on the site of the traditional site of Calvary? Well, because that was the day that the bridegroom was taken away. That was the wedding day of Jesus the bridegroom, the divine bridegroom, who gives himself for the sake of his Church, and in that reveals his divinity. I'll close with a quote from Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*. He says this about the passage for today:

Jesus identifies himself here as the “bridegroom” of God’s promised marriage with his people and, by doing so, he mysteriously places his own existence, himself, within the mystery of God. In him, in an unexpected way, God and man become one, become a “marriage,” though this marriage—as Jesus subsequently points out—passes through the Cross, through the “taking away” of the bridegroom.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 1:252.