



Lectio Divina

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LECTIO DIVINA

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Tuesday, March 1, 2022

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Lord,

guide the course of world events

and give Your Church the joy and peace of serving You in freedom.

You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 10: 28-31

Peter began to say to Jesus, "We have given up everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel who will not receive a hundred times more now in this present age: houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and eternal life in the age to come. But many that are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Reflection

- In yesterday's Gospel, Jesus spoke about the conversation among the disciples about material goods: to get away from things, to sell everything, to give it to the poor and to follow Jesus. Or rather, like Jesus, they should live in total gratuity, placing their own life in the hands of God, serving the brothers and sisters (Mk 10: 17-27). In today's Gospel, Jesus explains how this life of gratuity and service of those who abandon everything for Him, for Jesus and for the Gospel, should be (Mk 10: 28-31).
- Mark 10: 28-31: A hundred times as much, as well as persecutions too. Peter observes: "We have left everything and followed You". It is like saying: "We have done what the Lord asked of the young rich man. We have abandoned everything, and we have followed You. Explain to us how our life should be." Peter wants Jesus to explain more of the new way of living in service and gratuity. The response from Jesus is beautiful, profound, and symbolic: "In truth there is no one who has left house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children or land for My sake and for the sake of the Gospel who will not receive a hundred times as much, houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and land, with persecutions too, now in the present time and in the world to come. Many who are first will be last and the last, first". The type of life which springs from the gift of everything is an example of the Kingdom which Jesus wants to establish (a) to extend the family and to create community; it increases a hundred times the number of brothers and sisters. (b) It produces the sharing of goods because all will have a hundred times more houses and land. Divine Providence incarnates itself and passes through the fraternal organization, where everything belongs to everyone

and there are no longer persons who are in need. They put into practice the Law of God which asks, "that there be no poor among you" (Dt 15: 4-11). This was what the first Christians did (Acts 2: 42-45). It is the perfect living out of service and gratuity. (c) They should not expect any privilege in return, no security, no type of promotion. Rather, in this life they will have all this, but with persecutions. Because in this world, organized on ego and the special interests of groups and people, those who want to live a gratuitous love and the gift of self will be crucified as Jesus was. (d) They will be persecuted in this world, but in the future world they will have eternal life, which the rich young man spoke about.

- Jesus is the choice of the poor. A two-fold slavery characterized the situation of the people of the time of Jesus: the slavery from the politics of Herod supported by the Roman Empire and maintained by a well-organized system of exploitation and repression, and the slavery of the official religion, maintained by the religious authority of the time. This is why the clan, the family, the community, were all being disintegrated, and a great number of the people were excluded, marginalized, homeless, and having no place in religion or in society. This is why several movements arose which were seeking a new way of living in community: the Essene, the Pharisees, and later on, the Zealots. In the community of Jesus there was something new which made it different from other groups. It was the attitude toward the poor and the excluded. The communities of the Pharisees lived separated. The word "Pharisee" means "separated". They lived separated from impure people. Many Pharisees considered people ignorant and cursed (Jn 7: 49), and in sin (Jo 9: 34). Jesus and His community, on the contrary, lived together with these excluded persons who were considered impure: publicans, sinners, prostitutes, and lepers (Mk 2: 16; 1: 41; Lk 7: 37). Jesus recognizes the richness and the values which the poor possess (Mt 11: 25-26; Lk 21: 1-4). He proclaims them blessed, because the Kingdom is theirs - it belongs to the poor (Lk 6: 20; Mt 5: 3). He defines His mission: "to proclaim the Good News to the poor" (Lk 4: 18). He himself lives as a poor person. He possesses nothing for Himself, not even a rock where to lay His head (Lk 9: 58). And to those who want to follow Him to share His life, He tells them to choose: God or money! (Mt 6: 24). He orders that they choose in favor of the poor! (Mk 10: 21). The poverty which characterized the life of Jesus and the disciples also characterized the mission. Contrary to other missionaries (Mt 23: 15), the disciples of Jesus could take nothing with them, neither gold, nor money, nor two tunics, nor purse, nor sandals (Mt 10:9-10). They had to trust in the hospitality offered to them (Lk 9: 4; 10: 5-6). If they would be accepted by the people, they should work like everybody else and live from what they would receive as wages for their work (Lk 10: 7-8). They should take care of the sick and those in need (Lk 10: 9; Mt 10: 8). Now they could tell the people: "The Kingdom of God is very near to you!" (Lk 10: 9).

Personal questions

- In your life, how do you practice as Peter did: "We have left everything and have followed you"?

- Gratuitous sharing, service, acceptance to the excluded, are signs of the Kingdom. What do I do to live this? When do I do it? Can there be more?
- Look inside. What is the real motivation? Is it from love, or for gain? Is it a “transaction,” gaining extra “credits” for the next life? Is pride involved? Are there other reasons?
- Worldly wisdom teaches one has to be powerful, a “mover and shaker”, to influence others. How does one influence others when they have given away everything and in the world’s eyes are poor? At what point, or in what way, would one’s poverty speak louder and be more influential?

Concluding Prayer

The whole wide world has seen the saving power of our God.

Acclaim Yahweh, all the earth, burst into shouts of joy! (Ps 98: 3-4)

Wednesday, March 2, 2022

Ash Wednesday

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, send Your Spirit to help us to read the Scriptures with the same mind that You read them to the disciples on the way to Emmaus. In the light of the Word, written in the Bible, You helped them to discover the presence of God in the disturbing events of Your sentence and death. Thus, the cross that seemed to be the end of all hope became for them the source of life and of resurrection.

Create in us silence so that we may listen to Your voice in creation and in the Scriptures, in events and in people, above all in the poor and suffering. May Your word guide us so that we, too, like the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, may experience the force of Your resurrection and witness to others that You are alive in our midst as source of fraternity, justice, and peace. We ask this of You, Jesus, Son of Mary, who revealed to us the Father and sent us Your Spirit. Amen.

Gospel Reading: Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-18

A key to the reading:

The Gospel of Ash Wednesday is taken from the Sermon on the Mount and offers us help in understanding the practice of the three works of mercy: prayer, almsgiving and fasting and the way to spend the time of Lent well. The manner of practicing these three works has changed over the centuries, according to the culture and customs of people and their state of health. Old people today still remember when there was a strict and compulsory fast of forty days throughout Lent. In spite of changes in the practice of the works of mercy, there still is the human and Christian obligation (i) to share our goods

with the poor (almsgiving), (ii) to live in contact with the Creator (prayer) and (iii) to be able to control our urges and desires (fasting). The words of Jesus on which we meditate can give us the necessary creativity to find new forms of living these three practices so important in the life of Christians.

A division of the text to assist in the reading:

- Matthew 6: 1: A general key to the understanding of the teaching that follows
- Matthew 6: 2: How not to go about almsgiving
- Matthew 6: 3-4: How to go about almsgiving
- Matthew 6: 5: How not to pray
- Matthew 6: 6: How to pray
- Matthew 6: 16: How not to fast
- Matthew 6: 17-18: How to fast

Text:

Jesus said to his disciples: "Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father. When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win the praise of others. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you." "When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners so that others may see them. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you." "When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites. They neglect their appearance, so that they may appear to others to be fasting. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to be fasting, except to your Father who is hidden. And your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you."

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

so that the Word of God may penetrate and enlighten our life.

Some Questions

to help us in our personal reflection.

- What touched you or pleased you most in this text?
- What is the meaning of Jesus' initial warning?
- What does Jesus criticize and teach about almsgiving? Make a resume for yourself.

- What does Jesus criticize and teach about prayer? Make a resume for yourself.
- What does Jesus criticize and teach about fasting? Make a resume for yourself.

For Those Who Wish to Go Deeper

The Context:

Jesus speaks of three things: almsgiving (Mt 6: 1-6), prayer (Mt 6: 5-15) and fasting (Mt 6: 16-18). These were the three works of mercy of the Jews. Jesus criticizes the fact that they practice these works to be seen by others (Mt 6: 1). He will not allow that the practice of justice and mercy be used as a means to social promotion within the community (Mt 6: 2, 5, 16). In the words of Jesus there comes to light a new kind of relationship with God that is revealed to us. He says, "Your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you" (Mt 6: 4)," Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him" (Mt 6: 8), "If you forgive others their failings, your heavenly Father will forgive you yours" (Mt 6: 14). Jesus presents us with a new way of approaching the heart of God. A meditation on His words concerning the works of mercy may help us discover this new way.

A commentary on the text:

- Matthew 6: 1: A general key to an understanding of the teaching that follows
 Jesus says, "Be careful not to parade your uprightness in public to attract attention; otherwise, you will lose all reward from your Father in heaven." The justice referred to by Jesus is the place where God wants us to be. The way there is found in the Law of God. Jesus warns that it is not enough to observe the law so as to be praised by people. Earlier He had said, "For I tell you, if your uprightness does not surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of Heaven" (Mt 5: 26). In reading these words we must not only think of the Pharisees of Jesus time, but above all of the Pharisee that is dormant in each one of us. Had Joseph, Mary's spouse, followed the justice of the law of the Pharisees, he would have had to renounce Mary. But he was just (Mt 1: 19), and already possessed the new justice proclaimed by Jesus. That is why he broke the ancient law and saved Mary's and Jesus' lives. The new justice proclaimed by Jesus rests on another foundation, springs from another source. We must build our peace from the inside, not in what we do for God, but in what God does for us. This is the general key to an understanding of the teaching of Jesus on the works of mercy. In what follows, Matthew applies this general principle to the practice of almsgiving, prayer and fasting. Didactically, he first expresses what must not be and then immediately teaches what should be.
- Matthew 6: 2: How not to go about almsgiving
 The wrong way of giving alms, then and now, is that of doing it in public so as to be acknowledged and acclaimed by others. We often see on pews of churches the words: Gift of such-and-such a family. On television, politicians love to appear as great benefactors of humanity on occasions of inaugurations of public works at the service of the community. Jesus says, "Those who act thus have already had their reward."

- Matthew 6: 3-4: How to go about almsgiving

The correct way of giving alms is this: Your left hand must not know what your right hand is doing! In other words, we must give alms in such a way that not even I must feel that I am doing something good that deserves a reward from God and praise from others. Almsgiving is an obligation. It is a way of sharing something that I have with those who have nothing. In a family, what belongs to one belongs to all. Jesus praises the example of the widow who gave of what was needed for herself (Mk 12: 44).

- Matthew 6: 5: How not to pray

Speaking of the wrong way of praying, Jesus mentions some strange practices and customs of His day. When the trumpet sounded for morning, midday and evening prayer, there were those who sought to be in the middle of the road to pray solemnly with arms outstretched so as to be seen by all and thus be considered as pious people. Others took up extravagant poses in the synagogue so as to draw the attention of the community.

- Matthew 6: 6: How to pray

So as to leave no doubt, Jesus over-emphasizes the manner of praying. He says that we must pray in secret, only before God the Father. No one will see you. Maybe before others you may even seem to be a person who does not pray. This does not matter! Even of Jesus it was said, "He is not God!" That is because Jesus often prayed at night and did not care what others thought. What matters is to have one's conscience at peace and to know that God is the Father who welcomes me, not because of what I do for God or because of the satisfaction that I seek in the eyes of others, who appreciate me as one who is pious and prays.

- Matthew 6: 16: How not to fast

Jesus criticizes wrong practices concerning fasting. There were those who bore a sad face, did not wash, wore torn clothes, did not comb their hair, so that all could see that they were fasting in a perfect manner.

- Matthew 6: 17-18: How to fast

Jesus suggests the opposite: When you fast, put scent on your head, wash your face, so that no one may know that you are fasting, only Your Father who is in heaven.

As we said earlier, it is a new manner of accessing the heart of God that is opening before our eyes. For our own interior peace, Jesus does not ask what we do for God, but what God does for us. Almsgiving, prayer and fasting are not currency to buy God's favor but are our response of gratitude for the love received and experienced.

Further information:

The broader context of Matthew's Gospel

Matthew's Gospel was written for a community of converted Jews who were experiencing a deep crisis of identity in relation to their past. After their conversion to

Jesus, they continued to live according to their old traditions and frequented the synagogue, together with their relatives and friends, just as before. But they suffered because of the strong pressure from their Jewish friends who did not accept Jesus as the Messiah. This tension grew after the year 70 AD. When in 66 AD the revolt of the Jews against Rome broke out, two groups refused to take part, the Pharisees and the Jewish Christians. Both groups held that going against Rome had nothing to do with the coming of the Messiah, as some thought. After the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70, all the other Jewish groups disappeared. Only the Pharisees and the Jewish Christians remained. Both groups claimed to be the heirs of the promise of the prophets and, thus, the tension grew between brothers, because of the inheritance. The Pharisees reorganized the rest of the people and took an ever-stronger position against the Christians, who ended by being excommunicated from the synagogues. This excommunication rekindled the whole problem of identity. Now the Christians were officially and formally separated from the people of the promise. They could no longer frequent their synagogue, their rabbis. And they asked themselves, "Who are the real people of God: they or us? On whose side is God? Is Jesus really the Messiah?"

Thus, Matthew writes his Gospel (1) for this group of Christians, as a Gospel of consolation for those who had been excommunicated and persecuted by the Jews, helping them to overcome the trauma of breaking away; (2) as a Gospel of revelation, showing that Jesus is the true Messiah, the new Moses, who fulfills the promises; (3) as a Gospel of the new practice, showing how they must achieve true justice, greater than the justice of the Pharisees.

A key to the Sermon on the Mount

- The Sermon on the Mount is the first of five sermons in Matthew's Gospel. It describes the conditions that will allow a person to enter the Kingdom of God: the way in, the new reading of the law, the new way of looking at and practicing the works of mercy; the new way of living in community. In a word, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus communicates the new way of looking at the things of Life and the Kingdom. The following is a division that serves as a key to reading:
- Mt 5: 1-16: The way in
- Mt 5: 1-10: The eight Beatitudes help us to see where the kingdom is already present (among the poor and persecuted) and where it will be soon (among the other six groups).
- Mt 5: 12-16: Jesus addresses His words of consolation to His disciples and warns that anyone who lives the beatitudes will be persecuted (Mt 5:11-12), but his or her life will have meaning because he/she will be the salt of the earth (Mt 5:13) and the light of the world (Mt 5: 14-16).
- Mt 5: 17-to-6: 18: The new relationship with God: A new Justice
- Mt 5: 17-48: The new justice must be greater than that of the Pharisees

Jesus radicalizes the law, that is, He brings it back to its roots, to its main and ultimate purpose which is to serve life, justice, love and truth. The commandments of the law point to a new way of life, avoided by the Pharisees (Mt 5: 17-20).

Jesus immediately presents various examples as to how the commandments of the Law of God given to Moses are to be understood: “of old it was said, but I say to you” (Mt 5: 21-48)

- Mt 6: 1-18: The new justice must not seek reward or merit (This is the Gospel of this Ash Wednesday).
- Mt 6: 19-34: The new relationship to the goods of this world: a new vision of creation
Jesus comes to grips with the primary needs of life: food, clothing, house and health. This is the part of life that causes most anxiety in people. Jesus teaches how to relate to material goods and to the riches of the world: do not accumulate goods (Mt 6: 19-21); do not look at the world with sad eyes (Mt 6: 22-23); do not serve God and money at the same time (Mt 6: 24); do not worry about food and drink (Mt 6: 23-34).
- Mt 7: 1-29: The new relationship with people: a new life in community
Do not seek the straw in your brother’s eye (Mt 7: 1-5); do not cast pearls before swine (Mt 7: 6); Do not be afraid of asking for things from God (Mt 7: 7-11); observe the golden rule (Mt 7: 12); seek the narrow and difficult path (Mt 7: 13-14); be wary of false prophets (Mt 7: 15-20); do not just talk but do (Mt 7: 21-23); the community built on these principles will stand in spite of raging storms (Mt 7: 24-27). The outcome of these words is a new awareness in the face of the scribes and doctors (Mt 7: 28-29).

Prayer in a Psalm: Psalm 40 (39)

Proclaiming the great justice of God I waited, I waited for Yahweh,
then He stooped to me and heard my cry for help. He pulled me up from the seething
chasm,
from the mud of the mire. He set my feet on rock,
and made my footsteps firm.
He put a fresh song in my mouth, praise of our God.
Many will be awestruck at the sight,
and will put their trust in Yahweh.
How blessed are those who put their trust in Yahweh, who have not sided with rebels
and those who have gone astray in falsehood. How much You have done, Yahweh, my
God
Your wonders, Your plans for us -- You have no equal. I will proclaim and speak of them;
they are beyond number.
You wanted no sacrifice or cereal offering, but You gave me an open ear,
You did not ask for burnt offering or sacrifice for sin; then I said, “Here I am, I am
coming.”
In the scroll of the book, it is written of me, my delight is to do Your will;

Your law, my God, is deep in my heart.

I proclaimed the saving justice of Yahweh in the great assembly. See, I will not hold my tongue,

as You well know.

I have not kept Your saving justice locked in the depths of my heart but have spoken of Your constancy and saving help.

I have made no secret of Your faithful and steadfast love, in the great assembly.

You, Yahweh, have not withheld Your tenderness from me; Your faithful and steadfast love will always guard me.

For troubles surround me, until they are beyond number; my sins have overtaken me;

I cannot see my way.

They outnumber the hairs of my head, and my heart fails me.

Be pleased, Yahweh, to rescue me, Yahweh, come quickly and help me!

Shame and dismay to all who seek to take my life. Back with them,

let them be humiliated who delight in my misfortunes. Let them be aghast with shame,

those who say to me, "Aha, aha!"

But joy and happiness in You to all who seek You! Let them ceaselessly cry,

"Great is Yahweh" who love Your saving power. Poor and needy as I am,

the Lord has me in mind.

You, my helper, my Savior, my God, do not delay.

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank for the word that has enabled us to understand better the will of the Father. May Your Spirit enlighten our actions and grant us the strength to practice what Your Word has revealed to us. May we, like Mary, Your mother, not only listen to but also practice the Word. You who live and reign with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

Thursday, March 3, 2022

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,
You love us and You invite us
to share in Your own life and joy, through a personal decision.
Help us to choose You and life and to remain ever loyal
to this basic option
by the power of Jesus Christ, Your Son,
who was loyal to You and to us, now and forever.

Gospel Reading - Luke 9: 22-25

Jesus said to his disciples: "The Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised." Then he said to all, "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. What profit is there for one to gain the whole world yet lose or forfeit himself?"

Reflection

Yesterday we entered into the season of Lent. Up until now the daily Liturgy followed the Gospel of Mark, step by step. Beginning yesterday until Easter, the sequence of the readings of the day will be dictated by the ancient tradition of Lent and of preparation for Easter. From the very first day, the perspective is that of the Passion, Death and Resurrection and of the meaning which this mystery has for our life. This is what is proposed in the rather brief text of today's Gospel. The text speaks of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus and affirms that the following of Jesus presupposes that we carry our cross after Jesus.

Before, in Luke 9: 18-21, Jesus asks, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" They answered giving different opinions: John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the ancient prophets. After having heard the opinions of others, Jesus asks, "Who do you say I am?" Peter answers, "The Christ of God!" that is, the Lord is the one awaited by the people! Jesus agrees with Peter, but He orders and charges them not to say this to anyone. Why did Jesus forbid this? Because at that time everybody was expecting the Messiah, but each one according to his own mind: some as king, others as priest, doctor, warrior, judge, or prophet! Jesus thinks in a different way. He identifies Himself with the Messiah, servant and suffering, announced by Isaiah (42: 1-9; 52: 13-53: 12)

The first announcement of the Passion. Jesus begins to teach that He is the Messiah, the Servant and affirms that, as Messiah, the Servant announced by Isaiah, soon He will be put to death in the carrying out of His mission of justice (Is 49: 4-9; 53: 1-12). Luke usually follows the Gospel of Mark, but here he omits the reaction of Peter, who advised Jesus against or tried to dissuade Him from thinking of the suffering Messiah and he also omits the hard response: "Far from me, Satan! Because you do not think as God, but as men!" Satan is a Hebrew word which means accuser, the one who draws others far away from the path of God. Jesus does not allow Peter to get Him away from His mission.

Conditions to follow Jesus. Jesus draws conclusions valid even until now: "If anyone wants to follow Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross every day and follow Me." At that time the cross was the death penalty which the Roman Empire gave to marginalized criminals. To take up the cross and to carry it following Jesus was the same as accepting to be marginalized by the unjust system which legitimized injustices. It was the same as to break away from the system. As St. Paul says in the letter to the Galatians, "The world has been crucified for Me and I to the world" (Gal 6: 14). The cross is not fatalism, neither is it an exigency from the Father. The Cross is the consequence of the commitment freely assumed by Jesus to reveal the Good News that God is Father, and that, therefore, we all should be accepted and treated as brothers and sisters. Because of this revolutionary announcement, He was persecuted, and He was not afraid to deliver His own life. There is no greater proof of love than to give one's life for one's brother or sister.

Personal Questions

- Everybody was waiting for the Messiah, each one in his/her own way. Which is the Messiah whom I await and whom people today await?
- The condition to follow Jesus is the cross. How do I react before the crosses of life?

Concluding Prayer

How blessed is anyone who rejects the advice of the wicked and does not take a stand in the path that sinners tread,
nor a seat in company with cynics,
but who delights in the law of Yahweh
and murmurs His law day and night. (Ps 1: 1-2)

Friday, March 4, 2022

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord of the Covenant,

we have not to fear Your judgment if like You we become rich in mercy and full of compassion for our neighbor. May we not only know that You ask us but practice with sincere hearts to share our food with the hungry and to loosen the bonds of injustice, that through us Your light may shine and Your healing spread far and wide. Be with us in Your goodness.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 9: 14-15

The disciples of John approached Jesus and said, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast much, but your disciples do not fast?" Jesus answered them, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast."

Reflection

Today's Gospel is a brief version of the Gospel which we already meditated on in January, when the same theme of fasting was proposed to us (Mk 2: 18-22), but there is a small difference. Today, the Liturgy omits the whole discourse of the new piece of cloth on an old cloak and the new wine in an old skin (Mt 9: 16-17) and concentrates its attention on fasting.

Jesus does not insist on the practice of fasting. Fasting is a very ancient practice and done in almost all religions. Jesus Himself practiced it during the forty days (Mt 4: 2). But He did not insist His disciples do the same. He leaves them free. For this reason, the disciples of John the Baptist and of the Pharisees, who were obliged to fast, want to know why Jesus does not insist on fasting.

While the bridegroom is with them, they do not need to fast. Jesus responds with a comparison. When the bridegroom is with the friends of the spouse, that is, during the wedding feast, it is not necessary for them to fast. Jesus considers Himself the spouse. The disciples are the friends of the spouse. The time which Jesus is with the disciples is the wedding feast. The day will come in which the spouse will no longer be there. Then, they can fast if they so desire. In this phrase Jesus refers to His death. He knows and He becomes aware that if He continues along this path of freedom the religious authority will want to kill Him.

Fasting and abstinence from meat are universal practices. The Muslims have fasting during Ramadan, during which they don't eat until the rising of the sun. For diverse

reasons, people impose upon themselves some form of fasting. Fasting is an important means to control oneself and this exists in almost all religions. It is also appreciated by those who are health conscious.

The Bible has many references to fasting. It was a way of making penance and of attaining conversion. Through the practice of fasting, Christians imitated Jesus who fasted for forty days. Fasting helps to attain the freedom of mind, self-control, and perhaps a critical vision of reality. It is an instrument to free our mind and not allow one to be transported by any breeze. It is a means to take better care of health. Fasting can be a form of identification with the poor who are obliged to fast the whole year and eat meat very rarely. There are also those who fast in order to protest.

Even if fasting and abstinence are no longer observed today, the basic objective of this practice continues to remain unchanged and is a force which should animate our life: to participate in the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus. Surrender one's own life in order to be able to possess it in God. Become aware or conscious of the fact that the commitment to the Gospel is a one-way journey, without returning, which demands losing one's life in order to be able to possess and find all things in full liberty.

Personal Questions

- What form of fasting do you practice? And if you do not practice any, what is the form which you could practice?
- How can fasting help me to better prepare for the celebration of Easter?

Concluding Prayer

Have mercy on me, O God, in Your faithful love,
in Your great tenderness wipe away my
offenses; wash me clean from my guilt,
purify me from my sin. (Ps 51: 1-2)

Saturday, March 5, 2022

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord our God, merciful Father, when You call us to repentance, you want us to turn to people and to build up peace and justice among us all. According to Your promise, let us become, with Your strength,

lights for those in darkness, water for those who thirst, re-builders of hope and happiness for all.

May we thus become living signs of Your love and loyalty, for You are our God for ever.

Gospel Reading - Luke 5: 27-32

Jesus saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the customs post. He said to him, "Follow me." And leaving everything behind, he got up and followed him. Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were at table with them. The Pharisees and their scribes complained to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus said to them in reply, "Those who are healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do. I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners."

Reflection

Today's Gospel presents the same theme which we reflected upon in January in the Gospel of Mark (Mk 2: 13-17). This time, it is only the Gospel of Luke which speaks and the text is much shorter, concentrating its attention on the principal supper which is the call and conversion of Levi, and what the conversion implies for us who are entering into the time of Lent.

Jesus calls a sinner to be His disciple. Jesus calls Levi, a tax collector, and he immediately left everything, follows Jesus, and begins to form part of the group of the disciples. Luke says that Levi had prepared a great banquet in his house. In the Gospel of Mark, it seemed that the banquet was in Jesus' house. What is important here is the insistence on the communion of Jesus with sinners, around the table, which was a forbidden thing.

Jesus did not come for the just, but for sinners. This gesture of Jesus causes great anger among the religious authorities. It was forbidden to sit at table with tax collectors and sinners, because to sit at table with someone meant to treat him as a brother! With His way of doing things, Jesus was accepting the excluded and was treating them as brothers of the same family of God. Instead of speaking directly with Jesus, the Pharisees speak with the disciples: Why do You eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners? Jesus answers: It is not those that are well who need the doctor; I have come to call not the upright, but sinners, to repentance! His consciousness of His mission helps Jesus to find the response to indicate the way for the announcement of the Good News of God. He has come to unite the dispersed people, to reintegrate those who are excluded, to reveal that God is not a severe judge who condemns and expels, but rather He is Father who accepts and embraces.

Personal Questions

- Jesus accepts and includes people. What is my way of accepting people?
- Jesus' gesture reveals the experience that He has of God the Father. What is the image of God which I bear and express to others through my behavior?

Concluding Prayer

Listen to me, Yahweh, answer me, for I am poor and needy.

Guard me, for I am faithful,

save Your servant who relies on You. (Ps 86: 1-2)

Sunday, March 6, 2022

First Sunday of Lent

Lectio

Initial Prayer

Oh Lord, at the beginning of this Lenten time You invite me to meditate, once more, on the account of the temptations, so that I may discover the heart of the spiritual struggle and, above all, so that I may experience victory over evil.

Holy Spirit, "visit our minds" because frequently, many thoughts proliferate in our mind which make us feel that we are in the power of the uproar of many voices. The fire of love also purifies our senses and our heart so that they may be docile and available to the voice of Your Word. Enlighten us (*accende lumen sensibus, infunde amorem cordibus*) so that our senses may be ready to dialogue with You. If the fire of Your love blazes up in our heart, over and above our aridity, it can flood the true life, which is fullness of joy.

Reading of the Gospel: Luke 4: 1-13

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert for forty days, to be tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and when they were over he was hungry. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, One does not live on bread alone." Then he took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a single instant. The devil said to him, "I shall give to you all this power and glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I may give it to whomever I wish. All this will be yours, if you worship me." Jesus said to him in reply, "It is written: You shall worship the Lord, your God, and him alone shall you serve." Then he led him to Jerusalem, made him stand on the parapet of the temple, and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written: He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you, and: With their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone." Jesus said to him in reply, "It also says, You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test." When the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him for a time.

Moment of Prayerful Silence:

To listen, silence is necessary: of the soul, of the spirit, of the senses, and also exterior silence, with the purpose of listening to what the Word of God intends to communicate.

Meditatio

Key for the reading:

Luke, with the refinement of a narrator, mentions in 4: 1-44 some aspects of the ministry of Jesus after His baptism, among them the temptations of the devil. In fact, he says that Jesus, “Filled with the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert, for forty days” (Lk 4: 1-2). Such an episode in the life of Jesus is something preliminary to His ministry, but it can also be understood as the moment of transition from the ministry of John the Baptist to that of Jesus. In Mark such an account of the temptations is more generic. In Matthew, it is said that Jesus “was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil” (Mt 4: 1), these last words attribute the experience of the temptations to an influence which is at the same time heavenly and diabolical. The Lukan account modifies Matthew’s text in such a way as to show that Jesus, “filled with the Holy Spirit”, leaves the Jordan on His own initiative and is led by the Spirit into the desert for forty days, where “He is tempted by the devil” (4: 2). The meaning which Luke wants to give to the temptations of Jesus is that those were an initiative of the devil and not a programmed experience of the Holy Spirit (S. Brown). It is as if Luke wanted to keep clearly distinct the person of the devil from the person of the Holy Spirit.

Another element to be kept in mind is the order in which Luke places the temptations: *desert – sight of the kingdoms of the world – pinnacle of Jerusalem*. In Matthew, instead, the order varies: *desert – pinnacle – high mountain*. Exegetes discuss which is the original disposition, but they have not arrived at a unanimous opinion. The difference could be explained beginning with the third temptation (the culminating one): for Matthew the “mountain” is the summit of the temptation because in his Gospel he places all his interest on the theme of the mountain (we just have to remember the Sermon on the Mount, the presentation of Jesus as “the new Moses”); for Luke, instead, the last temptation takes place on the pinnacle of the temple of Jerusalem because one of the great interests of his Gospel is the city of Jerusalem (Jesus in Luke’s account is on the way toward Jerusalem where salvation is definitively fulfilled) (Fitzmyer).

The reader can legitimately ask himself, “In Luke, just as in Matthew, were there possible witnesses to the temptations of Jesus?” The answer is certainly negative. From the account of Luke it appears clearly that Jesus and the devil are completely alone. Jesus’ answers to the devil are taken from Sacred Scripture; they are quotations from the Old Testament. Jesus faces the temptations, and particularly that of the worship which the devil intends from Jesus Himself, having recourse to the Word of God as bread of life, as protection from God. The recourse to the Word of God contained in the book of Deuteronomy, considered by exegetes as a long meditation on the law, shows Luke’s intention to recall this episode in the life of Jesus with God’s plan, who wished to save the human race.

Did these temptations take place historically? Why do some, among believers and non-believers, hold that such temptations are only some fantasy about Jesus, some invention of a story? Such questions are extremely important. Certainly, it is not possible to give a literal and unsophisticated explanation, or perhaps to think that these could have happened in an external way. Dupont's explanation seems to offer an alternative: "Jesus speaks about an experience which He has lived, but translated into a figurative language, adapted to strike the minds of His listeners" (Les Tentations de Jesus au Desert, 128). More than considering them as an external fact, the temptations are considered as a concrete experience in the life of Jesus. It seems to me that this is the principal reason which has guided Luke and the other evangelists in transmitting those scenes. The opinions of those who hold that the temptations of Jesus are fictitious or invented are deprived of foundation, neither is it possible to share the opinion of Dupont himself, when he says that these were "a purely spiritual dialogue that Jesus had with the devil" (Dupont, 125). Looking within the New Testament (Jn 6: 26-34; 7: 1-4; Heb 4: 15; 5: 2; 2: 17a) it is clear that the temptations were an evident truth in the life of Jesus. The explanation of Raymond Brown is interesting and can be shared: "Matthew and Luke would have done no injustice to historical reality by dramatizing such temptations within a scene, and by masking the true tempter by placing this provocation on his lips" (the Gospel According to John, 308). In synthesis we could say that the historicity of the temptations of Jesus or the taking root of these in the experience of Jesus might be described with a "figurative language" (Dupont) or "dramatized" (Raymond Brown). One must distinguish the content (the temptations in the experience of Jesus) from its container (the figurative or dramatized language). It is possible that these two interpretations are much more correct than those which interpret them in a purely literal sense.

An additional key to the reading:

However, these intellectual interpretations, that this episode in Jesus' life as transmitted to us through the gospel, are "dramatizations" or speaking figuratively, also fall short and can be misleading. In the book "On Heaven and Earth," Pope Francis, the then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, said, "I believe that the devil exists" and "his greatest achievement in these times has been to make us believe he doesn't exist." As for the existence of the devil, theologian Monsignor Corrado Balducci points out that "Satan is mentioned about 300 times in the New Testament, much more than the Holy Spirit."

In a week we will celebrate Jesus' Transfiguration on the mountain. This is not an abstract dramatization, but rather that Moses and Elijah appeared and the three disciples actually heard the voice of God, yet to accept that the Son of God might actually and verbally turn away Satan, we find it incredulous. In Pope Francis' *Apostolic Exhortation Gaudete Et Exsultate*, we read: "Hence, we should not think of the devil as a myth, a representation, a symbol, a figure of speech or an idea" (161).

Without witnesses to the event, Dupont and Brown resort to examining the event in terms of modern empirical standards. Yet, turning to *Gaudete Et Exsultate* again, we read "We will not admit the existence of the devil if we insist on regarding life by empirical standards alone, without a supernatural understanding. It is precisely the conviction that this malign power is present in our midst that enables us to understand

how evil can at times have so much destructive force." (160) This represents the old Gnostic desire to shape events according to what the human intellect can easily and completely grasp, and to replace divine mystery with something more easily understood or identified with. While the three temptations do have symbolic meaning, it should not detract from its realism as well. "Evil is not only an abstract idea or the absence of good. Evil is a person, Satan: the Evil One. Satan is the angel who opposes God and who desires to disrupt the power of God in our lives." - *Bishop James Conley, Southern Nebraska Register.*

Jesus himself identifies Satan as someone He has seen: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (Lk 10: 18). "The prince of this world is coming," he says, "against me he can do nothing" (Jn 14: 30), as well as in Jn 16: 11 and Jn 12: 31. By claiming that the evangelist must be "dramatizing" these events, or merely using figurative descriptions, Dupont and Brown enter into a form of rationalism that denies how Jesus spoke at other times. From a literary style point of view, we would not expect every event to be transmitted as a quotation, nor would we expect Him to return to the disciples saying "guess what happened to me in the desert..." In that age, with its cultural and religious obsession with sin and Satan, this direct exchange would have been treated respectfully as it was passed down. We cannot directly infer it to be figurative merely because it isn't a direct quotation or is without human witnesses.

The temptations do share a common theme though, one of division. To separate Jesus from the Father, from His disciples, and from His mission should He accept his (Satan's) proposals. In his address to new bishops in missionary territories in 2016, Pope Francis advised: "Divisions are the weapon that the devil has most at hand to destroy the Church from within." These divisions are at play today once we move our understanding of gospel events from faith to rationalism or pragmatism.

Father Raniero Cantalamessa, OFM Cap, the Pontifical Household preacher, puts it well in his 1st Lenten homily in 2008: If many people find belief in demons absurd, it is because they take their beliefs from books, they pass their lives in libraries and at desks... How could a person know anything about Satan if he has never encountered the reality of Satan, but only the idea of Satan in cultural, religious and ethnological traditions? They treat this question with great certainty and a feeling of superiority, doing away with it all as so much "medieval obscurantism." But it is a false certainty.

It is like someone who brags about not being afraid of lions and proves this by pointing out that he has seen many paintings and pictures of lions and was never frightened by them. On the other hand, it is entirely normal and consistent for those who do not believe in God to not believe in the devil. The episode of Jesus' temptations in the desert that is read on the First Sunday of Lent helps us to have some clarity on this subject.

First of all, do demons exist? That is, does the word "demon" truly indicate some personal being with intelligence and will, or is it simply a symbol, a manner of speaking that refers to the sum of the world's moral evil, the collective unconscious, collective alienation, etc.? Many intellectuals do not believe in demons in the first sense. But it must be noted that many great writers, such as Goethe and Dostoyevsky, took Satan's existence very seriously. Baudelaire, who was certainly no angel, said that "the demon's greatest trick is to make people believe that he does not exist." - *Translation by Joseph*

G. Trabbic .

St Teresa, who battled Satan, and St John of the Cross, firmly believed in Satan as a being, as did Pope Paul VI: "one of the greatest needs is the defense from that evil which is called the Devil. Evil is not merely a lack of something but an effective agent, a living spiritual being, perverted and perverting. A terrible reality, mysterious and frightening..."

Thus, we don't have to abandon a literal or historical view of these events merely because it defies our modernist senses. Moreover, it would be overly presumptive to redefine Luke's narrative, of an interaction between the Son of God and the Prince of Evil, as something that must have occurred on merely human terms or in the imagination.

Luke intends to remind us in these scenes that the temptations were addressed to Jesus by an external agent. They are not the result of a psychological crisis or because He finds Himself in a personal conflict with someone. The temptations, rather, lead back to the "temptations" which Jesus experienced in His ministry: hostility, opposition, rejection. Such "temptations" were real and concrete in His life. He had no recourse to His divine power to solve them. These trials were a form of "diabolical seducing" (Fitzmyer), a provocation to use His divine power to change the stones into bread and to manifest Himself in eccentric ways.

The temptations end with this expression: "Having exhausted every way of putting Him to the test, the devil left Jesus (4: 13). Therefore, the three scenes which contain the temptations are to be considered as the expression of all temptations or trials which Jesus had to face. But the fundamental point is that Jesus, insofar as He is the Son, faced and overcame the "temptation". Furthermore, He was tested and tried in His fidelity to the Father and was found to be faithful.

A last consideration regarding the third temptation. In the first two temptations the devil provoked Jesus to use His divine Sonship to deny His human finiteness, to avoid providing for Himself bread like all men, requiring from Him an illusory omnipotence. In both of these, Jesus does not respond, saying, "I do not want to!", but appeals to the law of God, His Father: "It is written... it has been said..." A wonderful lesson. But the devil does not give in and presents a third provocation, the strongest of all: to save Himself from death. In one word, to throw Himself down from the pinnacle meant a sure death. The devil quotes scripture, Psalm 91, to invite Jesus to the magic and spectacular use of divine protection, and in the last instance, to the denial of death. This passage in the Gospel of Luke launches a strong warning: the erroneous use of the Word of God can be the occasion of temptations. How is that? My way of relating myself to the Bible is placed in crisis especially when I use it only to give moral teachings to others who are in difficulty or in a state of crisis. We refer to certain pseudo-spiritual discourses which are addressed to those who are in difficulty: "Are you anguished? There is nothing else you can do but pray and everything will be solved". This means to ignore the consistency of the anguish which a person has and which frequently stems from a biochemical fact or a psycho-social difficulty, or a mistaken way of placing oneself before God. It would be more coherent to say: Pray and ask the Lord to guide you in having recourse to the human mediation of the doctor or of a wise and knowledgeable

friend so that they can help you in lessening or curing you of your anguish. One cannot propose biblical phrases, in a magic way, to others, neglecting to use the human mediation. "The frequent temptation is that of making a bible of one's own moral, instead of listening to the moral teachings of the Bible." (X. Thévenot).

An additional key to the reading:

However, both sides of this argument tend to be too simplistic, and just as it would be mistaken to advise a hungry person to just pray for a meal to appear, it is just as erroneous to reduce St John of the Cross' Dark Night to a mere psycho-social difficulty, as well as St Terese's visions, or St Paul of the Cross or St Teresa of Calcutta's difficulties. We are then left with the task of discerning between these two recourses. St Ignatius of Loyola, who himself experienced suffering on both physical and spiritual levels, offers much guidance on discernment in these matters. A spiritual director can also help. Satan uses division to separate us from God, and Gnosticism, pragmatism, rationalism, and empiricism all have elements that drive us to decide "this I can do" and "this other maybe God could help", letting us decide, in a typically ever growing circle, that we can do without God, and relegating Him out of our lives.

The contemporary world expects God to come like earthquakes and thunder, rolling in to fix things. If that were so, there would be no opportunity for faith and no free will. God speaks as in a small whispering sound (1 Kings 19: 11-12), and when we don't hear it, we think He hasn't answered. Even more relevant would be to pray for guidance on where help or consolation is to be found, whether it be spiritual or physical, including recourse to the sacraments, Eucharistic Adoration, or the Rosary as well as finding a friend. Every hardship can be an opportunity to increase one's faith, even if it means doing some of the work oneself. "Amen, I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you" (Mt 17: 20).

In this time of Lent I am invited to get close to the Word of God with the following attitude: a tireless and prayerful devotion to the Word of God, reading it with a constant bond of union with the great traditions of the Church, and in dialogue with the problems of humanity today.

Oratio

Psalm 119:

How blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of Yahweh!
Blessed are those who observe His instructions, who seek Him with all their hearts,

Let us renew ourselves in the Spirit And put on the new man

Jesus Christ, our Lord,

in justice and in true sanctity. (St. Paul).

and, doing no evil, who walk in His ways.

You lay down Your precepts to be carefully kept.

*Let us follow Jesus Christ and serve Him
with a pure heart and good conscience. (Rule of Carmel)*

May my ways be steady in doing Your will.

Then I shall not be shamed,
if my gaze is fixed on Your commandments.

*Let us follow Jesus Christ and serve Him
with a pure heart and good conscience. (Rule of Carmel)*

I thank You with a sincere heart
for teaching me Your upright judgments. I shall do Your will;
do not ever abandon me wholly.

*Let us renew ourselves in the Spirit And put on the new man
Christ Jesus, our Lord,
created according to God the Father
in justice and in true sanctity. Amen (St. Paul).*

Final Prayer:

Lord, we look for You and we desire to see Your face, grant us that one day, removing the veil, we may be able to contemplate it.

We seek You in Scripture which speaks to us of You and under the veil of wisdom, the fruit of human searching.

We look for You in the radiant faces of our brothers and sisters, in the marks of Your Passion in the bodies of the suffering.

Every creature is signed by Your mark, everything reveals a ray of Your invisible beauty.

You are revealed in the service of the brother, You revealed Yourself to the brother by the faithful love which never diminishes.

Not the eyes but the heart has a vision of You, with simplicity and truth we try to speak with You.

Contemplatio

To prolong our meditation we suggest a reflection of Benedict XVI:

“Lent is the privileged time of an interior pilgrimage toward the One who is the source of mercy. It is a pilgrimage in which He Himself accompanies us through the desert of our poverty, supporting us on the way toward the intense joy of Easter. Even in the “dark valley” of which the Psalmist speaks (Psalm 23: 4), while the tempter suggests that we be dispersed or proposes an illusory hope in the work of our hands, God takes care of us and supports us. [...] Lent wants to lead us in view of the victory of Christ over

every evil which oppresses man. In turning to the Divine Master, in converting ourselves to Him, in experiencing His mercy, we discover a “look” which penetrates in the depth of ourselves and which can encourage each one of us.”

Monday, March 7, 2022

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord, holy God, loving Father,

you give us the task to love one another because You are holy

and You have loved us before we could love You.

Give us the ability to recognize Your Son in our brothers and sisters far and near.

Make us witnesses that love exists and is alive and that You, the God of love,

exist and are alive now forever.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 25: 31-46

Jesus said to his disciples: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?' And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.' Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the Devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me.' Then they will answer and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?' He will answer them, 'Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.' And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

Reflection

- The Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus as the New Messiah. Like Moses, Jesus also promulgates the Law of God. As with the ancient law, the new one, given by Jesus, also contains five books or discourses. The Sermon on the Mountain (Mt 5: 1 to 7: 27), the first discourse, opens with eight Beatitudes. The discourse on vigilance (Mt 2: 4, 1 to 25, 46), the fifth discourse, contains the description of the Last Judgment. The Beatitudes describe the door of entrance into the Kingdom, enumerating eight categories of people: the poor in spirit, the meek, the afflicted, those who hunger and thirst for justice, the merciful, the pure of heart, the peacemakers and the persecuted because of justice (Mt 5: 3-10). The parable of the Last Judgment tells us what we should do in order to possess the Kingdom: accept the hungry, the thirsty, the foreigners, the naked, the sick and the prisoners (Mt 25: 35-36): At the beginning, as well as at the end of the New Law, there are the excluded and the marginalized.
- Matthew 25: 31-33: Opening of the Last Judgment. The Son of Man gathers together around Him the nations of the world. He separates people as the shepherd does with the sheep and the goats. The shepherd knows how to discern. He does not make a mistake; sheep on the right, goats on the left. Jesus does not make a mistake. Jesus does not judge nor condemn. (cfr. Jn 3: 17; 12: 47). He does not separate alone. It is the person himself/herself who judges and condemns because of the way in which he/she behaves toward the little ones and the excluded.
- Matthew 25: 34-36: The sentence for those who are at the right hand of the Judge. Those who are at the right hand of the judge are called Blessed of my Father! That is, they receive the blessing which God promised to Abraham and to his descendants (Gen 12: 3). They are invited to take possession of the Kingdom, prepared for them from the foundation of the world. The reason for the sentence is the following: I was hungry, a foreigner, naked, sick and prisoner, and you accepted me and helped me! This sentence makes us understand who are the sheep. They are the persons who accepted the Judge when he was hungry, thirsty, a foreigner, naked, sick and prisoner. Because of the way of speaking about my Father and the Son of Man, we can know that the Judge is precisely Jesus Himself. He identifies Himself with the little ones!
- Matthew 25: 37-40: A request for clarification and the response of the Judge: Those who accept the excluded are called just. That means that the justice of the Kingdom is not attained by observing norms and prescriptions, but rather by accepting those in need. But it is strange that the just do not even know themselves when they accepted Jesus in need. Jesus responds: Every time that you have done this to one of my brothers, you have done it to me. Who are these little brothers of mine? In other passages of the Gospel of Matthew, the expression “my brothers” indicates the disciples (Mt 12: 48-50; 28: 10). This also indicates the members of the community who are more abandoned and neglected who have no place and are not well received (Mt 10: 40). Jesus identifies Himself with them. In the broader context of the last parable, the expression “my smallest brothers” is extended and includes all those

who have no place in society. It indicates all the poor. The just and the blessed by my Father are all the persons from all nations who accept and welcome others with total gratuity, independently of the fact that they are Christians or not.

- Matthew 25: 41-43: The sentence for those who were at the left-hand side. Those who were on the other side of the Judge are called cursed and they are destined to go to the eternal fire, prepared by the devil and his friends. Jesus uses a symbolic language common at that time to say that these persons will not enter into the Kingdom. And here, also, there is only one reason: they did not accept or welcome Jesus as one who is hungry, thirsty, a foreigner, naked, sick and/or a prisoner. It is not that Jesus prevents them from entering into the Kingdom, rather it is our way of acting that is our blindness which prevents us from seeing Jesus in the little ones.
- Matthew 25: 44-46: A request for clarification and the response of the Judge. The request for clarification indicates that it is a question of people who have behaved well, people who have their conscience in peace. They are certain to have always practiced what God asked from them. For this reason they were surprised when the Judge says that they did not accept Him, did not welcome Him. The Judge responds: Every time that you have not done these things to one of my brothers, the little ones, you did not do it to me. It is the omission! They did not do anything extra. They only missed practicing good towards the little ones and the excluded. This is the way the fifth Book of the New Law ends!

In the saints and Church Fathers we have a lot to learn about virtues and vices. It is not enough to just avoid vice, or sin, but to also work toward attaining virtue and virtuous behavior. To do no harm is not the same as to help. This is what we are called to do: to not just avoid doing wrong or harm, but to go out of our way to do good as well.

Personal Questions

- What struck you the most in this parable of the Last Judgment?
- Do I focus my life more on avoiding harm or on doing good for others?
- Stop and think: if the Last Judgment would take place today, would you be on the side of the sheep or on the side of the goats?

Concluding Prayer

The precepts of Yahweh are honest, joy for the heart;
the commandment of Yahweh is pure, light for the eyes. (Ps 19: 8)

Tuesday, March 8, 2022

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord God,

You speak Your mighty word to us, but we cannot hear it
unless it stirs our lives
and is spoken in human terms.

Keep speaking Your word to us, Lord, and open our hearts to it,
that it may bear fruit in us when we do Your will
and carry out what we are sent to do.

We ask You this through Your living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 6: 7-15

Jesus said to his disciples: "In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them. Your Father knows what you need before you ask him. "This is how you are to pray: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. "If you forgive men their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions."

Reflection

There are two versions of the Our Father: Luke (Lk 11: 1-4) and Matthew (Mt 6: 7-13). In Luke, the Our Father is shorter. Luke writes for the communities which came from Paganism. In Matthew the Our Father is found in the Discourse on the Mountain, in the part where Jesus orientates the disciples in the practice of the three works of piety: alms (Mt 6: 1-4), prayer (Mt 6: 5-15) and fasting (Mt 6: 16-18). The Our Father forms part of catechesis for the converted Jews. They were accustomed to pray, but had some vices which Matthew tries to correct.

- Matthew 6: 7-8: The faults to be corrected. Jesus criticizes the people for whom prayer was a repetition of a magic formula, strong words addressed to God to oblige Him to respond to our needs. The acceptance of our prayer by God does not depend on the repetition of words, but on God's goodness, on God who is love and mercy. He wants our good and knows our needs even before we pray to Him.
- Matthew 6: 9a: The first words: Our Father, Abba Father, is the name which Jesus used to address Himself to God. It reveals the new relationship with God that should

characterize the life of the communities (Ga 4: 6; Rm 8: 15). We say Our Father and not My Father. The adjective places the accent on the awareness or knowledge that we all belong to the great human family of all races and creeds. To pray to the Father is to enter in intimacy with Him. It also means to be sensitive to the cry of all the brothers and sisters who cry for their daily bread. It means to seek in the first place the Kingdom of God. The experience of God as our Father is the foundation of universal fraternity.

- Matthew 6: 9b-10: Three requests for the cause of God: The Name, the Kingdom, the Will. In the first part we ask that our relationship with God may be re-established again. To sanctify His name: The name JAHVE means I am with you! God knows. In this name He makes Himself known (Ex 3: 11-15). The name of God is sanctified when it is used with faith and not with magic; when it is used according to its true objective, not for oppression but for the liberty or freedom of the people and for the construction of the Kingdom. The coming of the Kingdom: The only Lord and King of life is God (Is 45: 21; 46: 9). The coming of the Kingdom is the fulfillment of all the hopes and promises. It is life in plenitude, the overcoming of frustration suffered with human kings and governments. This Kingdom will come when the Will of God will be fully accomplished. To do His will: The will of God is expressed in His Law. His will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. In Heaven the sun and the stars obey the laws of their orbit and create the order of the universe (Is 48: 12-13). The observance of the law of God will be a source of order and well-being for human life.
- Matthew 6: 11-13: Four petitions for the cause of the brothers: Bread, Pardon, Victory, Liberty. In the second part of the Our Father we ask that the relationship among persons may be restored. The four requests show how necessary it is to transform or change the structures of the community and society in order that all the sons and daughters of God may have the same dignity. The daily bread. In Exodus the people received the manna in the desert every day (Ex 16: 35). Divine Providence passed through the fraternal organization, the sharing. Jesus invites us to live a new Exodus, a new fraternal way of living together which will guarantee the daily bread for all (Mt 6: 34-44; Jo 6: 48-51). Forgive us our debts: Every 50 years, the Jubilee Year obliged people to forgive their debts. It was a new beginning (Lv 25: 8-55). Jesus announces a new Jubilee Year, a year of grace from the Lord (Lk 4: 19). The Gospel wants to begin everything anew! Do not lead us into temptation, do not put us to the test: In Exodus, people were tempted and fell (Dt 9: 6-12). The people complained and wanted to go back (Ex 16: 3; 17: 3). In the new Exodus, the temptation will be overcome by the strength which people receive from God (1 Co 10: 12-13). Deliver us from evil: The Evil One is Satan, who draws away from God and is a cause of scandal. He succeeds in entering in Peter (Mt 16: 23) and to tempt Jesus in the desert. Jesus overcomes him (Mt 4: 1-11). He tells us: Courage, I have conquered the world! (Jn 16: 33).
- Matthew 6: 14-15: Anyone who does not forgive will not be forgiven. In praying the Our Father, we pronounce the phrase which condemns us or absolves us. We say: Forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass us (Mt 6: 12). We offer God the measure of pardon that we want. If we forgive very much, He will forgive us very much. If we forgive little, He will forgive little. If we do not forgive, He will not forgive us.

Personal Questions

- Jesus prayer says forgive our debts . In some countries it is translated as forgive our offenses . What is easier to forgive, the offenses or to forgive the debts?
- Christian nations of the Northern Hemisphere (Europe and USA) pray everyday: Forgive our debts as we forgive those who are in debt to us! But they do not forgive the external debt of poor countries of the Third World. How can we explain this terrible contradiction, source of impoverishment of millions of people?
- Debt, in the context of society, is not only money. In fact, in referring to people who have served time in jail we say “they have paid their debt to society”. Do we accept these people back into society? Not only have they paid their “debt”, they are often treated as having not been forgiven.
- How do we forgive others in terms of immigration, documented or not, and accept them into our communities?

Concluding Prayer

Proclaim with me the greatness of Yahweh, let us acclaim His name together.

I seek Yahweh and He answers me, frees me from all my fears. (Ps 34: 3-4)

Wednesday, March 9, 2022

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Forgiving, merciful God,

we pray to You for a good measure of humility and honesty

to acknowledge before You and people

that we are weak and fallible men and women, who often try to turn a blind eye

to our shortcomings and our sins.

Strong with the grace won in the hard way by Your Son on the cross,

we beg You for the courage to seek Your forgiveness

and to turn and return wholeheartedly to You and to serve You and people.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Luke 11: 29-32

While still more people gathered in the crowd, Jesus said to them, "This generation is an evil generation; it seeks a sign, but no sign will be given it, except the sign of Jonah.

Just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. At the judgment the queen of the south will rise with the men of this generation and she will condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and there is something greater than Solomon here. At the judgment the men of Nineveh will arise with this generation and condemn it, because at the preaching of Jonah they repented, and there is something greater than Jonah here."

Reflection

We are in Lent. The Liturgy presents texts which can help us to convert ourselves and to change our life. What helps more in conversion are the facts of the history of the People of God. In today's Gospel, Jesus presents two episodes of the past: Jonah and the Queen of the South and transforms this into a mirror in such a way that one can discover God's call to conversion.

- Luke 11: 29: The evil generation which asks for a sign. Jesus calls the generation evil because it does not want to believe in Jesus and continues to ask for signs which can indicate that Jesus has been sent by the Father. But Jesus refuses to present these signs, because if they ask for a sign it is because they do not believe. The only sign which will be given is that of Jonah.
- Luke 11: 30: The sign of Jonah. The sign of Jonah has two different aspects. The first one is what the text of Luke affirms in today's Gospel. Jonah was a sign, through his preaching, for the people of Nineveh. Listening to Jonah, the people were converted. In the same way, the preaching of Jesus was a sign for His people, but the people did not show any sign of conversion. The other aspect is that which the Gospel of Matthew affirms when he quotes the same episode: For as Jonah remained in the belly of the sea-monster for three days and three nights, so will the Son of man be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights (Mt 12: 40). When the fish vomited Jonah into the dry land, he went to announce the Word of God to the people of Nineveh. In the same way, after the death and resurrection on the third day, the Good News will be announced to the people of Judah.
- Luke 11: 31: The Queen of the South. Following this, Jesus recalls the story of the Queen of the South, who came from the ends of the earth to meet Solomon, and to learn from his wisdom (cfr. I Kg 10: 1-10). Twice Jesus affirms: Look, there is something greater than Solomon here, and look, there is something much greater than Jonah here.

A very important point in the discussion between Jesus and the leaders of His people is the way in which Jesus and His enemies place themselves before God. The Book of Jonah is a parable which criticizes the mentality of those who wanted God only for the

Jews. In the story of Jonah, the pagans were converted listening to the preaching of Jonah and God accepts them in His goodness and does not destroy the city. When Jonah sees that God accepts the people of Nineveh and does not destroy the city Jonah became very indignant. He fell into a rage. He prayed to the Lord: Lord, is not this what I said would happen when I was still in my own country? That was why I first tried to flee to Tarshish, since I knew You were a tender, compassionate God, slow to anger, rich in faithful love, who relents about inflicting disaster. So now, Lord, please take my life, for I might as well be dead as go on living!. (Jon 4: 1-3). For this reason, Jonah was a sign for the Jews of the time of Jesus and it continues to be for us Christians. He wants for all to be disciples (Mt 28: 19), that is, that they be persons who, like Him, radiate and announce the Good News of the love of God for all peoples (Mk 16: 15).

Personal Questions

- Lent, the time for conversion. What has to change in the image of God that I have? Am I like Jonah or like Jesus?
- On what is my faith based, founded? In signs or in the Word of Jesus?

Concluding Prayer

God, create in me a clean heart, renew within me a resolute spirit,
do not thrust me away from Your presence,
do not take away from me Your spirit of holiness. (Ps 51: 10-11)

Thursday, March 10, 2022

Season of Lent

Opening prayer

Lord, our God,

You are a generous Father, who give us what is good for us simply because You love us.

Give us grateful hearts, Lord, that we may learn from You

to give and share without counting the cost but simply with love and joy,

as Jesus, Your Son, did among us,

who lives with You and the Holy Spirit forever.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 7: 7-12

Jesus said to his disciples: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which one of you

would hand his son a stone when he asked for a loaf of bread, or a snake when he asked for a fish? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him. "Do to others whatever you would have them do to you. This is the law and the prophets."

Reflection

The Gospel today gives a part of the Sermon on the Mount, the new law of God which has been revealed to us by Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount has the following structure:

- Mathew 5: 1-16: The entrance door: the Beatitudes (Mt 5:1-10) and the mission of the disciples: to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Mt 5: 12-16).
- Mathew 5: 17-18: The new relationship with God: The new justice (Mt 5:17-48) which does not expect a reward for practicing almsgiving, for praying and fasting (Mt 6: 1-18).
- Mathew 6: 19-34: The new relationship with the goods of the earth (Mt 6: 19-21), do not look at the world with a jaundiced eye (Mt 6: 22-23), do not serve God and money (Mt 6: 24), do not be concerned about food and drink (Mt 6: 23-34).
- Mathew 7: 1-23: The new relationship with other people: do not look for the splinter in your brother's eye (Mt 7: 1-5); do not throw your pearls in front of pigs (Mt 7: 6); the Gospel today: do not be afraid to ask things from God (Mt 7: 7-11); and the Golden Rule (Mt 7: 12); choose the hard and narrow roads (Mt 7: 13-14), beware of false prophets (Mt 7: 15-20).
- Mathew 7: 21-29: Conclusion: do not only speak but also practice (Mt 7: 21-23); the community built on this basis will resist the storm (Mt 7: 24-27). The result of these words is a new conscience before the scribes and the doctors (Mt 7: 28-29).
- Mathew 7: 7-8: Jesus' three recommendations: to ask, to seek and to knock: "Ask and you shall receive; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you!" A person is asked. The response depends both on the person as well as on the insistence with which it is asked (cf Lk 18: 1-7). The seeking is defined by some criteria. The better the criteria, the more certainty one can have of finding what one is looking for. To knock at the door is done with the hope that there will be someone on the other side of the door at home. Jesus completes the recommendation, offering the certainty of the response: "Ask and you shall receive; seek and you shall find; knock and it will be opened; because anyone who asks receives, and anyone who seeks will find and to anyone who knocks the door will be opened". That means that when we ask God, He listens to our petition. When we seek God, He allows Himself to be found (Isa 5: 5-6). When we knock on the door of God's house, He opens the door for us.
- Mathew 7: 9-11: Jesus' question to the people. "Is there anyone among you who would hand his son a stone when he asked for bread? Or would hand him a snake when he asked for a fish?" Here appears the simple and direct way which Jesus has for teaching the things of God to the people. Speaking to the parents, He connects

Himself to the daily experience. Between the lines of the question one can guess the response the people yelled out: "No!" because nobody gives a stone to a son who asks for bread. There is no father and no mother who would give a snake to their son when he asks for a fish. And Jesus draws the conclusion: "If you, then, evil as you are, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!" Jesus calls us evil to stress the certainty of being listened to by God when we ask Him for something. And this, because if we who are not saints, know how to give good things to our children, how much more is the Father in heaven. This comparison has as its objective to take away from our heart any doubt concerning the prayer addressed to God with trust. God will listen! Luke adds that God will give the Holy Spirit (Lk 11: 13).

- Mathew 7: 12: The Golden Rule. "So always treat others as you would like them to treat you; that is the law and the prophets." This is the summary of the entire Old Testament, of the law and the prophets. And this is the summary of everything which God wants to tell us, the summary of all the teaching of Jesus. This Golden Rule is not found only in the teaching of Jesus, but also, in one way or other, in all religions. This responds to the most profound and more universal sentiment of humanity.

Personal Questions

- Ask, seek, knock on the door: How do you pray and speak with God?
- Are you persistent in what you ask for, as the widow in Lk 18: 1-7 was, or do you give up after not getting results immediately? Would you pray persistently (and insistently) for years, or just months, or just a week?
- How are your wants aligned with what God would want for you?
- How do you live the Golden Rule?

Concluding Prayer

Lord I praise Your name for Your faithful love and Your constancy; Your promises surpass even Your fame.

You heard me on the day when I called,

and You gave new strength to my heart. (Ps 138: 2-3)

Friday, March 11, 2022

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

God of mercy and compassion,
you challenge us to be responsible
for the good and the evil we do
and You call us to conversion.
God, help us to face ourselves
that we may not use flimsy excuses
for covering up our wrongs.
Make us honest with ourselves,
and aware that we can always count on Jesus Christ
to be our guide and strength on the road to You,
now and for ever.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 5: 20-26

Jesus said to his disciples: "I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the Kingdom of heaven. You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment. But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment, and whoever says to his brother, raqa, will be answerable to the Sanhedrin, and whoever says, 'You fool,' will be liable to fiery Gehenna. Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Settle with your opponent quickly while on the way to court. Otherwise your opponent will hand you over to the judge, and the judge will hand you over to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Amen, I say to you, you will not be released until you have paid the last penny."

Reflection

The text of today's Gospel forms part of a broader or more extensive whole: Mt 5: 20 up to Mt 5: 48. In these passages Matthew tells us how Jesus interprets and explains the Law of God. Five times He repeats the phrase: You have heard how it was said to our ancestors, in truth I tell you! (Mt 5: 21, 27, 33, 38, 43). Before, He had said: Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; no, I have come not to abolish, but to complete them (Mt 5: 17). The attitude of Jesus before the Law is, at the same time, one of breaking and of continuity. He breaks away from the erroneous interpretations, but maintains firm the objective which the Law should attain: the practice of a greater justice, which is Love.

- Matthew 5: 20: An uprightness which surpasses that of the Pharisees. This first verse presents the general key of everything which follows in Matthew 5: 20-48. The word

Justice never appears in the Gospel of Mark, and it appears seven times in that of Matthew (Mt 3: 15; 5: 6, 10, 20; 6: 1, 33; 21:32). This has something to do with the situation of the communities for which Mark wrote. The religious ideal of the Jews of the time was to be just before God. The Pharisees taught: people attain justice before God when they succeed to observe all the norms of the law in all its details! This teaching generated a legalistic oppression and caused great anguish in the people because it was very difficult to be able to observe all the norms (cfr. Rm 7: 21-24). This is why Matthew takes the words of Jesus on justice to show that it has to surpass the justice of the Pharisees (Mt. 5: 20). According to Jesus, justice does not come from what I do for God in observing the law, but rather from what God does for me, accepting me as His son or as His daughter. The new ideal which Jesus proposes is the following: therefore, be perfect as is your Heavenly Father! (Mt 5: 48). That means: you will be just before God when you try to accept and forgive people as God accepts and pardons me, in spite of my defects and sins.

By means of these five very concrete examples, Jesus shows us what to do in order to attain this greater justice which surpasses the justice of the Jews and the Pharisees. As we can see, today's Gospel takes the example of the new interpretation of the fifth commandment: You shall not kill! Jesus has revealed what God wanted when He gave this commandment to Moses.

- Matthew 5: 21-22: The law says: You shall not kill! (Ex 20: 13). In order to observe fully this commandment it is not sufficient to avoid murdering. It is necessary to uproot from within everything which, in one way or another, can lead to murder, for example, anger, hatred, the desire to revenge, insult, and exploitation, etc.
- Matthew 5: 23-24. The perfect worship which God wants. In order to be accepted by God and to remain united to Him, it is necessary to reconcile oneself with brother and sister. Before the destruction of the Temple, in the year 70, when the Christian Jews participated in the pilgrimages in Jerusalem to present their offerings at the altar and to pay their promises, they always remembered this phrase of Jesus. In the year 80, at the time when Matthew wrote, the Temple and the Altar no longer existed. They had been destroyed by the Romans. The community and the communitarian celebration became the Temple and the Altar of God
- Matthew 5: 25-26: To reconcile oneself. One of the points on which the Gospel of Matthew exists the most is reconciliation. That indicates that in the communities of that time, there were many tensions among the radical groups with diverse tendencies and sometimes even opposing ones. Nobody wanted to cede to the other. There was no dialogue. Matthew enlightens this situation with the words of Jesus on reconciliation which demands acceptance and understanding. The only sin that God does not forgive is our lack of pardon toward others (Mt 6: 14). That is why one should try to reconcile yourself before it is too late!

Personal Questions

- Today there are many people who cry out for justice! What meaning does evangelical justice have for me?
- How do I behave before those who do not accept me as I am? How did Jesus behave before those who did not accept Him

Concluding Prayer

From the depths I call to You, Yahweh:

Lord, hear my cry.

Listen attentively to the sound of my pleading! (Ps 130: 1-2)

Saturday, March 12, 2022

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord God, from You comes the initiative of love. You seek us out and You tell us:

I am your God; you are my people. You love us in Jesus Christ, Your Son.

God, may our response of love

go far beyond the demands of any law. May we seek You and commune with You in the deepest of our being

and may we express our gratitude to You by going to our neighbor

with a love that is spontaneous like Yours. We ask You this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 5: 43-48

Jesus said to his disciples: "You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers and sisters only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same? So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Reflection

In today's Gospel we see how Jesus has interpreted the commandment "You shall not kill" in such a way that its observance leads to the practice of love. Besides saying "You

shall not kill" (Mt 5: 21), Jesus quoted four other commandments of the ancient law: you shall not commit adultery (Mt 5: 27), you shall not bear false witness (Mt 5: 33), eye for eye, and tooth for tooth (Mt 5: 38) and, in today's Gospel, you shall love your neighbor and will hate your enemy (Mt 5: 43), five times, Jesus criticizes and completes the ancient way of observing these commandments and indicates the new way to attain the objective of the law, which is the practice of love (Mt 5: 22-26; 5: 28-32; 5: 34-37; 5: 39-42; 5: 44-48).

Love your enemies. In today's Gospel Jesus quotes the ancient law which says: You will love your neighbor and hate your enemy. This text is not found like this in the Old Testament. It is more a question of the mentality of the time, according to which there was no problem if a person hated his enemy. Jesus was not in agreement and says: But I tell you: if you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Do not even the tax collectors do as much? And if you save your greetings for your brothers, are you doing anything exceptional? Do not even the gentiles do as much? You must, therefore, set no bounds to your love, just as your heavenly Father sets none to His. And Jesus gives us the proof. At the hour of His death He observed that which He preached.

Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing. A soldier takes the wrist of Jesus and places it on the arm of the cross, places a nail and begins to hammer it in. Several times. The blood was flowing down. The body of Jesus contorted with pain. The soldier, a mercenary, ignorant, far from knowing what he was doing, and of what was happening around him, continued to hammer as if it were a piece of the wall of his house and he had to put up a picture. At that moment Jesus prays for the soldier who tortures Him and addresses His prayer to the Father: Father, forgive them! They know not what they are doing! He loved the soldier who killed Him. Even wanting it with all their strength, the lack of humanity did not succeed to kill in Jesus His humanity and love! He will be imprisoned, they will spit on Him, will laugh and make fun of Him, they will make of Him a false king crowning Him with a crown of thorns, they will torture Him, will oblige Him to go through the streets like a criminal hearing the insults of the religious authority. On Calvary they will leave Him completely naked in the sight of all. But the poison of this lack of humanity did not succeed in suppressing the source of love and humanity which sprang from within Jesus. The water of the love which sprang from within was stronger than the poison of hatred which was coming from without. Looking at that soldier, Jesus felt sorrow and prayed for him and for all: Father, forgive them! They know not what they are doing! Jesus, in solidarity, almost excuses those who were ill-treating and torturing Him. He was like a brother who goes with his murderous brothers before the judge and he, the victim of his own brothers, says to the judge: They are my brothers, you know they are ignorant. Forgive them! They will become better! He loved the enemy!

Be perfect as is your Father who is in Heaven. Jesus does not want to frighten, because this would be useless. He wants to change the system of human living altogether. The notion which He constructs comes from the new experience He has from God the Father, full of tenderness and who accepts all! The words of threat against the rich cannot be an occasion of revenge on the part of the poor. Jesus orders that we have a contrary attitude: Love your enemies! True love cannot depend on what one receives from others. Love should want the good of others independently of what they do for

me. This is the way God's love is for us.

Personal Questions

- Am I capable to love my enemies?
- Contemplate Jesus, in silence, who at the hour of His death, loved the enemy who killed Him.

Concluding Prayer

How blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the Law of Yahweh!

Blessed are those who observe His instructions, who seek Him with all their hearts (Ps 119: 1-2)

Sunday, March 13, 2022

Second Sunday of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, send Your Spirit to help us read the scriptures with the same mind that You read them to the disciples on the way to Emmaus. In the light of the Word, written in the bible, You helped them to discover the presence of God in the disturbing events of Your sentence and death. Thus, the cross that seemed to be the end of all hope became for them the source of life and of resurrection.

Create silence in us so that we may listen to Your voice in creation and in the scriptures, in events and in people, above all, in the poor and suffering. May Your word guide us so that we too, like the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, may experience the force of Your resurrection and witness to others that You are alive in our midst as source of fraternity, justice, and peace. We ask this of You, Jesus, son of Mary, who revealed the Father to us and sent us Your Spirit. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Luke 9: 28-36

A Key to the Reading:

A few days earlier, Jesus had said that He, the Son of Man, had to be tried and crucified by the authorities (Lk 9: 22; Mk 8: 31). According to the information in the gospels of Mark and Matthew, the disciples, especially Peter, did not understand what Jesus had said and were scandalized by the news (Mt 16: 22; Mk 8: 32). Jesus reacted strongly and turned to Peter calling him Satan (Mt 16: 23; Mk 8: 33). This was because Jesus' words did not correspond with the ideal of the glorious Messiah whom they imagined. Luke does not mention Peter's reaction and Jesus' strong reply, but he does describe, as do the other Evangelists, the episode of the Transfiguration. Luke sees the Transfiguration as

an aid to the disciples so that they may be able to get over the scandal and change their idea of the Messiah (Lk 9: 28-36). Taking the three disciples with Him, Jesus goes up the mountain to pray, and while He is praying, is transfigured. As we read the text, it is good to note what follows: "Who appears with Jesus on the mountain to converse with Him? What is the theme of their conversation? What is the disciples' attitude?"

A Division of the Text as an Aid to the Reading:

- Luke 9: 28: The moment of crisis
- Luke 9: 29: The change that takes place during the prayer
- Luke 9: 30-31: The appearance of the two men and their conversation with Jesus
- Luke 9: 32-34: The disciples' reaction
- Luke 9: 35-36: The Father's voice

The Text:

Jesus took Peter, John, and James and went up the mountain to pray. While he was praying his face changed in appearance and his clothing became dazzling white. And behold, two men were conversing with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his exodus that he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem. Peter and his companions had been overcome by sleep, but becoming fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. As they were about to part from him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good that we are here; let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." But he did not know what he was saying. While he was still speaking, a cloud came and cast a shadow over them, and they became frightened when they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my chosen Son; listen to him." After the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. They fell silent and did not at that time tell anyone what they had seen.

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

so that the Word of God may penetrate and enlighten our life.

Some Questions

to help us in our personal reflection.

- What did you like most in this episode of the Transfiguration? Why?
- Who are those who go to the mountain with Jesus? Why do they go?
- Moses and Elijah appear on the mountain next to Jesus. What is the significance of these two people from the Old Testament for Jesus, for the disciples, for the community in the 80s and for us today?
- Which prophecy from the Old Testament is fulfilled in the words of the Father concerning Jesus?
- What is the disciples' attitude during this episode?

- Has there been a transfiguration in your life? How have such experiences of transfiguration helped you to fulfill your mission better?
- Compare Luke's description of the Transfiguration of Jesus (Lk 9: 28-36) with his description of the agony of Jesus in the Garden (Lk 22: 39-46). Try to see whether there are any similarities. What is the significance of these similarities?

A Key to the Reading

for those who wish to go deeper into the theme.

The Context of Jesus' Discourse:

In the two previous chapters of Luke's Gospel, the innovation brought by Jesus highlights the tensions between the New and the Old Testaments. In the end, Jesus realized that no one had understood His meaning, much less His person. People thought that He was like John the Baptist, Elijah or some other prophet (Lk 9: 18-19). The disciples accepted Him as the Messiah, but a glorious Messiah, according to the expectations issued by the government and the official religion of the temple (Lk 9: 20-21). Jesus tried to explain to His disciples that the journey foreseen by the prophets was one of suffering because of its commitment to the excluded, and that a disciple could only be a disciple if he/she took up his/her cross (Lk 9: 22-26). But Jesus did not meet with much success. It is in such a context of crisis that the Transfiguration takes place. In the 30s, the experience of the Transfiguration had a very important significance in the life of Jesus and the disciples. It helped them overcome the crisis of faith and to change their ideals concerning the Messiah. In the 80s, when Luke was writing for the Christian communities in Greece, the meaning of the Transfiguration had already been deepened and broadened. In the light of Jesus' resurrection and of the spread of the Good News among the pagans in almost every country, from Palestine to Italy, the experience of the Transfiguration began to be seen as a confirmation of the faith of the Christian communities in Jesus, *Son of God*. The two meanings are present in the description and interpretation of the Transfiguration in Luke's Gospel.

A Commentary on the Text:

- Luke 9: 28: The moment of crisis.

On several occasions Jesus entered into conflict with the people and the religious and civil authorities of his time (Lk 4: 28-29; 5: 21-20; 6: 2-11; 7:30, 39; 8: 37; 9:9). He knew they would not allow Him to do the things He did. Sooner or later they would catch Him. Besides, in that society, the proclamation of the Kingdom, as Jesus did, was not to be tolerated. He either had to withdraw or face death! There were no other alternatives. Jesus did not withdraw. Hence the cross appears on the horizon, not just as a possibility but as a certainty (Lk 9: 22). Together with the cross there also appears the temptation to go on with the idea of the Glorious Messiah and not of the Crucified, suffering servant, announced by the prophet Isaiah (Mk 8: 32-33). At this difficult moment Jesus goes up the mountain to pray, taking with Him Peter, James,

and John. Through His prayer, Jesus seeks strength not to lose sense of direction in His mission (cf. Mk 1: 35).

- Luke 9: 29: The change that takes place during the prayer.

As soon as Jesus starts praying, His appearance changes and He appears glorious. His face changes and His clothes become white and shining. It is the glory that the disciples imagined for the Messiah. This transformation told them clearly that Jesus was indeed the Messiah expected by all. But what follows the episode of the Transfiguration will point out that the way to glory is quite different from what they imagined. The Transfiguration will be a call to conversion.

- Luke 9: 30-31: Two men appear speaking with Jesus.

Together with Jesus and in the same glorious state there appear Moses and Elijah, the two major exponents of the Old Testament, representing the Law and the Prophets. They speak with Jesus about “the Exodus brought to fulfilment in Jerusalem.” Thus, in front of the disciples, the Law and the Prophets confirm that Jesus is truly the glorious Messiah, promised in the Old Testament and awaited by the whole people. They further confirm that the way to glory is through the painful way of the exodus. Jesus’ exodus is His passion, death and resurrection. Through His “exodus” Jesus breaks the dominion of the false idea concerning the Messiah spread by the government and by the official religion and that held all ensnared in the vision of a glorious, nationalistic messiah. The experience of the Transfiguration confirmed that Jesus as Messiah Servant constituted an aid to free them from their wrong ideas concerning the Messiah and to discover the real meaning of the Kingdom of God.

- Luke 9: 32-34: The disciples’ reaction.

The disciples were in deep sleep. When they woke up, they saw Jesus in His glory and the two men with Him. But Peter’s reaction shows that they were not aware of the real meaning of the glory in which Jesus appeared to them. As often happens with us, they were only aware of what concerned them. The rest escapes their attention. “Master, it is good for us to be here!” And they do not want to get off the mountain anymore! When it is question of the cross, whether on the Mount of the Transfiguration or on the Mount of Olives (Lk 22: 45), they sleep! They prefer the glory to the cross! They do not like to speak or hear of the cross. They want to make sure of the moment of glory on the mountain, to extend it, and they offer to build three tents. Peter did not know what he was saying.

While Peter was speaking, a cloud descended from on high and covered them with its shadow. Luke says that the disciples became afraid when the cloud enfolded them. The cloud is the symbol of the presence of God. The cloud accompanied the multitude on their journey through the desert (Ex 40: 34-38; Num 10: 11-12). When Jesus ascended into heaven, He was covered by a cloud and they no longer saw Him (Acts 1: 9). This was a sign that Jesus had entered forever into God’s world.

- Luke 9: 35-36: The Father's voice.

A voice is heard from the cloud that says: "This is My Son, the Chosen, listen to Him." With this same sentence the prophet Isaiah had proclaimed the Messiah-Servant (Isa 42: 1). First Moses and Elijah, now God Himself presents Jesus as the Messiah-Servant who will come to glory through the cross. The voice ends with a final admonition: "Listen to Him!" As the heavenly voice speaks, Moses and Elijah disappear and only Jesus is left. This signifies that from now on only He will interpret the scriptures and the will of God. He is the Word of God for the disciples: "Listen to Him!"

- The proclamation "This is My Son, the Chosen; listen to Him" was very important for the community of the late 80s. Through this assertion God the Father confirmed the faith of Christians in Jesus as Son of God. In Jesus' time, that is, in the 30s, the expression Son of Man pointed to a very high dignity and mission. Jesus Himself gave a relative meaning to the term by saying that all were children of God (cf. John 10: 33- 35). But for some the title Son of God became a resume of all titles, over one hundred that the first Christians gave Jesus in the second half of the first century. In succeeding centuries, it was the title of Son of God that the Church concentrated all its faith in the person of Jesus.

A Deepening:

- The Transfiguration is told in three of the Gospels: Matthew (Mt 17: 1-9), Mark (Mk9: 2-8) and Luke (Lk 9: 28-36). This is a sign that this episode contained a very important message. As we said, it was a matter of great help to Jesus, to His disciples and to the first communities. It confirmed Jesus in His mission as Messiah-Servant. It helped the disciples to overcome the crisis that the cross and suffering caused them. It led the communities to deepen their faith in Jesus, Son of God, the One who revealed the Father and who became the new key to the interpretation of the Law and the Prophets. The Transfiguration continues to be of help in overcoming the crisis that the cross and suffering provoke today. The three sleeping disciples are a reflection of all of us. The voice of the Father is directed to us as it was to them: "This is My Son, the Chosen; listen to Him!"
- In Luke's Gospel there is a great similarity between the scene of the Transfiguration (Lk 9: 28-36) and the scene of the agony of Jesus in the Garden of Olives (Lk 22: 39-46). We may note the following: in both scenes Jesus goes up the mountain to pray and takes with Him three disciples, Peter, James and John. On both occasions, Jesus' appearance is transformed and He is transfigured before them; glorious at the Transfiguration, perspiring blood in the Garden of Olives. Both times heavenly figures appear to comfort Him, Moses and Elijah and an angel from heaven. Both in the Transfiguration and in the Agony, the disciples sleep, they seem to be outside the event and they seem not to understand anything. At the end of both episodes, Jesus is reunited with His disciples. Doubtless, Luke intended to emphasize the resemblance between these two episodes. What would that be? Perhaps it is to show

that understanding takes time and effort, even for the Apostles, so we should persevere and not be asleep, especially at those crucial moments in our lives when He is revealing Himself to us personally. It is in meditating and praying that we shall come to understand the meaning that goes beyond words, and to perceive the intention of the author. The Holy Spirit will guide us.

- Luke describes the Transfiguration. There are times in our life when suffering is such that we might think: "God has abandoned me! He is no longer with me!" And then suddenly we realize that He has never deserted us, but that we had our eyes bandaged and were not aware of the presence of God. Then everything is changed and transfigured. It is the transfiguration! This happens every day in our lives.

Psalm 42 (41)

"My soul thirsts for the living God!"

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for Thee, O God.

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?

My tears have been my food day and night,

while men say to me continually, "Where is your God?" These things I remember, as I pour out my soul:

how I went with the throng,

and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,

a multitude keeping festival.

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?

Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him, my help and my God.

My soul is cast down within me;

therefore I remember Thee from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.

Deep calls to deep at the roar of Your torrents; all Thy waves and breakers have gone over me.

By day the Lord commands His steadfast love; and at night His song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life. I say to God, my rock:

"Why hast Thou forgotten me?

Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?" As with a deadly wound in my body,

my adversaries taunt me,

while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?"

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?

Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him, my help and my God.

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank You for the word that has enabled us to understand better the will of the Father. May Your Spirit enlighten our actions and grant us the strength to practice what Your Word has revealed to us. May we, like Mary, Your mother, not only listen to but also practice the Word. You who live and reign with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

Monday, March 14, 2022

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Just and holy God, our loving Father,

you offered us Your hand in friendship, and You sent us Your Son Jesus to go with us on the road of obedience and loyalty. God, we often hurt this friendship, we act as if we were not Your sons and daughters. See the look of shame on our faces.

Forgive us, for we count on You. Accept our thanks for continuing to take us as we are and loving us notwithstanding our sins. We ask You this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Luke 6: 36-38

Jesus said to his disciples: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. "Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven. Give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you."

Reflection

- These three brief verses of today's Gospel (Lk 6:36-38) are the final part of a brief discourse of Jesus (Lk 6: 20-38). In the first part of His discourse, He addresses Himself to the disciples (Lk 6: 20) and to the rich (Lk 6: 24) proclaiming four beatitudes for the disciples (Lk 6: 20-23), and four curses for the rich (Lk 6: 20-26). In the second part, He addresses Himself to all those who are listening (Lk 6: 27), that is, the immense crowd of poor and sick, who had come from all parts (Lk 6:17-19). The words which He addresses to this people and to all of us are demanding and difficult: to love the enemy (Lk 6, 27), not curse them (Lk 6: 28), offer the other cheek to the one who slaps you on one, and do not complain if someone takes what is ours (Lk 6: 29). How can this difficult advice be understood? The explanation is given in the three verses of today's Gospel from which we draw the center of the Good News brought by Jesus.

- Luke 6: 36: Be merciful as your Heavenly Father is merciful. The Beatitudes for the disciples (Lk 6: 20-23) and the curses against the rich (Lk 6: 24-26) cannot be interpreted as an occasion for the poor to take revenge against the rich. Jesus orders us to have the contrary attitude. He says: Love your enemies! (Lk 6: 27). The change which Jesus wants to bring about in us does not consist in merely changing something to invert the system, because in this way nothing would change. He wants to change the system. The idea which Jesus wants to portray comes from the new experience that He has of God the Father, full of tenderness, who accepts all, good and bad, who makes the sunshine on both the good and on the bad and makes the rain fall on both good and bad (Mt 5: 5, 45). True love does not depend, nor can it depend, on what I receive from others. Love must want the good of the other independently of what he does for me. Because this is how God's love is for us. He is merciful not only toward those who are good, but with all, even with the ungrateful and the evil (Lk 6: 35). The disciples of Jesus should radiate this merciful love.
- Luke 6: 37-38: Do not judge and you will not be judged. These last words repeat in a clearer way what Jesus had said before: Treat others as you would like them to treat you (Lk 6: 31; cf. Mt 7: 12). If you do not want to be judged, do not judge! If you do not want to be condemned, do not condemn. If you want to be forgiven, then forgive! If you want to receive a good measure, give this good measure to others! Do not wait for the other one to take the initiative. You take it and begin now! You will see that it is like this.

Personal Questions

- Lent is a time of conversion. Which is the conversion which today's Gospel is asking of me?
- Have you already been merciful as the Heavenly Father is? What are my limits in being merciful and forgiving?

Concluding Prayer

Help us, God our Savior, for the glory of Your name;

Yahweh, wipe away our sins, rescue us for the sake of Your name. (Ps 79: 9)

Tuesday, March 15, 2022

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

God our Father,
may we love You in all things and above all things
and reach the joy You have prepared for us
beyond all our imagining.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son,
who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 23: 1-12

Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples, saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses. Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example. For they preach but they do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens hard to carry and lay them on people's shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them. All their works are performed to be seen. They widen their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels. They love places of honor at banquets, seats of honor in synagogues, greetings in marketplaces, and the salutation 'Rabbi.' As for you, do not be called 'Rabbi.' You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers. Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven. Do not be called 'Master'; you have but one master, the Christ. The greatest among you must be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

Reflection

Today's Gospel is part of Jesus' long criticism of the scribes and the Pharisees (Mt 23: 1-39). Luke and Mark mention only a few lines of this criticism aimed at the religious heads of the time. Only the Gospel of Matthew has a longer presentation of this. This very severe text gives us a glimpse of the polemics which existed in the communities of Matthew with the communities of the Jews of Galilee and Syria of that time.

In reading this text, which is strongly critical of the Pharisees, we have to be very careful not to be unfair to the Jewish people. Many Christians, for centuries, have had attitudes against the Jews and, for this reason, engenders attitudes against the Christians. What is important in meditating on these texts is to discover their objective. Jesus condemns the lack of sincerity in the relationship with God and with neighbor. He is speaking about hypocrisy, that of yesterday as well as that of today - of our hypocrisy!

- Matthew 23: 1-3: The basic error: they say, but they do not do. Jesus addresses Himself to the multitude and to the disciples and criticizes the scribes and the Pharisees. The

reason for attacking them is the disjuncture between their words and their actions. They speak, but they do not do. Jesus recognizes the authority and the knowledge of the scribes: “The scribes and the Pharisees occupy the chair of Moses! You must, therefore, do and observe what they tell you, but do not be guided by what they do, since they do not practice what they preach.”

- Matthew 23: 4-7: The fundamental error is manifested in diverse ways. The fundamental error is hypocrisy: “They say, but they do not do”. Jesus enumerates the points which reveal this. Some scribes and Pharisees imposed heavy laws upon the people. They knew the laws well, but they did not practice them; neither did they use their knowledge to lessen the weight imposed upon the people. They did everything possible to be seen and praised; they wore special tunics for prayer; they liked the first places and to be greeted in the public squares. They wanted to be called “Teacher.” They represented a type of community which maintained, legitimized, and nourished the difference of social classes. It legitimized the privileges of the great and the inferior position of the little ones. Now, if there is something which displeases Jesus, it is appearances which deceive.
- Matthew 23: 8-12: How to overcome the fundamental error. How should a Christian community be? All the community functions should be assumed as a service: “The greatest among you must be your servant!” You should call nobody teacher (Rabbi), nor father, nor guide; because the community of Jesus has to maintain, legitimize and nourish not the differences, but rather the fraternal spirit. This is the fundamental law: “You are all brothers and sisters!” The fraternal spirit comes from the experience that Jesus is Father and makes of all of us brothers and sisters. “Anyone who raises himself up will be humbled, and anyone who humbles himself will be raised up.”

The group of the Pharisees! The group of the Pharisees was born in the second century before Christ, with the objective of a more perfect observance of the law of God, especially regarding the prescriptions on purity. They were more open to novelty than the Sadducees. For example, they accepted faith in the resurrection and faith in the angels, something which the Sadducees did not accept. The life of the Pharisees was an exemplary witness: they prayed and studied the law for eight hours a day; they worked eight hours in order to be able to survive; they dedicated eight hours to rest. This is the reason why people respected them very much. And in this way, they helped people to keep their own identity and not to lose it, in the course of centuries.

The so-called Pharisaic mentality. With time, the Pharisees took hold of power and no longer listened to the appeals of the people, nor did they allow them to speak. The word “Pharisee” means “separated”. Their observance was so strict and rigorous that they separated themselves from the rest of the people. This is why they were called “separated”. From this comes the expression “pharisaic mentality”. It is typical of the people who think they can attain justice through the rigid and rigorous observance of the law. Generally, they are people who are afraid, who do not have the courage to assume the risk of liberty and of responsibility. They hide themselves behind the law and authority. When these people obtain an important function, they become harsh and insensitive and indifferent to hide their own imperfection.

Rabbi, Guide, Teacher, Father. These are four titles that Jesus prohibits people to use. Today, in Church, the priests are called "Father." Many study in the university of the Church and obtain the title of "Doctor" (Teacher). Many people receive spiritual direction and take advice from people who are called "Spiritual directors" (Guides). What is important is to take into account the reason which impelled Jesus to prohibit the use of these titles. If these were used by people in order to affirm their position of authority and their power, these people would be in error and would be criticized by Jesus. If these titles were used to nourish and deepen fraternal spirit and service, they would not be criticized by Jesus.

Personal Questions

- What is my reason for living and working in community?
- How does the community help me to correct and to improve my motivations?
- Do you know of people within the Church who also see themselves as more important or above others because of their position in the Church? Why is this?

Concluding Prayer

I am listening.

What is God's message?

Yahweh's message is peace for His people,
for His faithful, if only they renounce their folly. (Ps 85: 8)

Wednesday, March 16, 2022

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,

your prophets remind us in season and out of season of our responsibilities toward You and toward the world of people.

When they disturb and upset us, let it be a holy disturbance that makes us restless, eager to do Your will and to bring justice and love around us.

We ask You this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 20: 17-28

As Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, He took the Twelve disciples aside by themselves, and said to them on the way, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and scourged and

crucified, and He will be raised on the third day." Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee approached Jesus with her sons and did him homage, wishing to ask him for something. He said to her, "What do you wish?" She answered him, "Command that these two sons of mine sit, one at your right and the other at your left, in your kingdom." Jesus said in reply, "You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the chalice that I am going to drink?" They said to him, "We can." He replied, "My chalice you will indeed drink, but to sit at my right and at my left, this is not mine to give but is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father." When the ten heard this, they became indignant at the two brothers. But Jesus summoned them and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and the great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many."

Reflection

Today's Gospel presents three points: the third announcement of the Passion (Mt 20: 17-19), the petition of the mother of the sons of Zebedee (Mt 20: 20-23) and the discussion of the disciples regarding the first place among them (Mt 20: 24-28).

- Matthew 20: 17-19: The third announcement of the Passion. Going toward Jerusalem, Jesus walks in front of them. He knows that He is going to be killed. The Prophet Isaiah had already announced it (Is 50: 4-6; 53: 1-10). His death is not the fruit of a plan established in advance, but the consequence of the commitment taken concerning the mission received from the Father, to be at the side of the excluded of His time. This is why Jesus speaks to the disciples about the tortures and death that He will have to face in Jerusalem. The disciple should follow the Master, even if he has to suffer like Him. The disciples are frightened and accompany Him with fear. They do not understand what is happening (cfr. Lk 18: 34). Suffering did not correspond to the idea that they had of the Messiah (cfr. Mt 16: 21-23).
- Matthew 20: 20-21: The petition of the mother to obtain the first place for her sons. The disciples do not only not understand the importance and significance of the message of Jesus, but they continue with their own personal ambitions. When Jesus insists on service and the gift of oneself, they continue to ask for the first places in the Kingdom. The mother of James and John, taking her sons with her, gets close to Jesus. The two did not understand the proposal of Jesus. They were concerned only about their own interests. This is a sign that the ideology of that time had profoundly penetrated the mentality of the disciples. In spite of the fact of having lived with Jesus several years, they had not renewed their way of seeing things. They looked at Jesus as always, with the same look. They wanted a reward for following Jesus. The same tensions existed in the communities of the time of Matthew and they still exist today in our own communities.
- Matthew 20: 22-23: Jesus' answer. Jesus reacts firmly: You do not know what you are asking for! And He asks if they are capable of drinking the chalice that he, Jesus, will

drink and if they are ready to receive the baptism which He will receive. It is the chalice of suffering, the baptism of blood! Jesus wants to know if they, instead of the places of honor, accept to give their life up to death. Both answer: We can! It seems to be a response not given from within, because a few days later, they abandoned Jesus and left Him alone at the hour of suffering (Mk 14: 50). They do not have a great critical knowledge; they do not perceive their personal reality. In what concerns the first place, the place of honor, in the Kingdom at the side of Jesus, the one who grants this is the Father. What he, Jesus, has to offer, is the chalice and the baptism, suffering and the cross.

- Matthew 20: 24-27: It should not be like that among you: Jesus speaks once again, on the exercise of power (cfr. Mk 9: 33-35). At that time those who held power did not give an account to people. They acted as they wished (cfr. Mk 6: 27-28). The Roman Empire controlled the world and maintained it with the force of the arms. Through tributes, taxes, it succeeded in concentrating the riches of the people in the hands of a few in Rome. Society was characterized by the repressive and abusive exercise of power. Jesus had an altogether different proposal. He said: It should not be like that among you; the one who wants to become great among you should become a servant, and the one who wants to be the first one among you will become your slave! He teaches against privileges and rivalry. He wants to change the system and insists on that service as the remedy against personal ambition.
- Matthew 20: 28: The summary of the life of Jesus. Jesus defines His mission and His life: I have not come to be served but to serve! He has come to give His own life for the salvation of many. He is the Messiah Servant, announced by the Prophet Isaiah (cfr. Is 42: 1-9; 49: 1-6; 50: 4-9); 52: 13-53: 12). He learned from His Mother who said: Behold, the handmaid of the Lord! (Lk 1: 38). A totally new proposal for the society of that time.

Personal Questions

- James and John ask for a favor and Jesus promises suffering. What do I ask Jesus for in my prayer? How do I accept suffering and the pains and sorrow which come to me in my life?
- Jesus said: It should not be like that among you! Does my way of living in community follow this advice of Jesus?

Concluding Prayer

Draw me out of the net they have spread for me, for You are my refuge;

into Your hands I commit my spirit, by You have I been redeemed. God of truth. (Ps 31: 4-5)

Thursday, March 17, 2022

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,

many of us never had it so good, and so we have become smug and self-satisfied, happy in our own little world.

God, may our ears remain open to Your word and our hearts to You and to our brothers and sisters. Do not allow us to forget You, or to place our trust in ourselves. Make us restless for You through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Luke 16: 19-31

Jesus said to the Pharisees: "There was a rich man who dressed in purple garments and fine linen and dined sumptuously each day. And lying at his door was a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who would gladly have eaten his fill of the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. Dogs even used to come and lick his sores. When the poor man died, he was carried away by angels to the bosom of Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried, and from the netherworld, where he was in torment, he raised his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he cried out, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am suffering torment in these flames.' Abraham replied, 'My child, remember that you received what was good during your lifetime while Lazarus likewise received what was bad; but now he is comforted here, whereas you are tormented. Moreover, between us and you a great chasm is established to prevent anyone from crossing who might wish to go from our side to yours or from your side to ours.' He said, 'Then I beg you, father, send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they too come to this place of torment.' But Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.' He said, 'Oh no, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' Then Abraham said, 'If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead.'"

Reflection

Every time that Jesus has something important to communicate, He creates a story and tells a parable. In this way, through reflection on an invisible reality, He leads those who listen to Him to discover the invisible call of God, who is present in life. A parable is meant to make us think and reflect. For this reason it is important to pay attention to even the smallest details. In the parable in today's Gospel there are three persons: the poor Lazarus, the rich man without a name, and Father Abraham. In the parable, Abraham represents the thought of God. The rich man without a name represents the dominating ideology of that time. Lazarus represents the silent cry of the poor in the time of Jesus and in all times.

- Luke 16: 19-21: The situation of the rich man and the poor man. The two extremes of society. On the one side, aggressive richness; on the other, the poor man without resources, without rights, covered with wounds, without anybody to accept him, to receive him, except the dogs which came to lick his wounds. What separates both of them is the closed door of the rich man's house. For the rich man, there is no acceptance nor pity concerning the poor man at his door. But the poor man has a name; the rich man does not. That is, the poor man has his name written in the book of life, not the rich one. The poor man's name is Lazarus. It means God helps. And through the poor man, God helps the rich man who could have a name in the book of life. But the rich man does not allow himself to be helped by the poor man, because he keeps his door closed. The beginning of this parable is a faithful mirror of what was happening during the time of Jesus and the time of Luke. It is a mirror of everything that is happening today in the world!
- Luke 16:22: The change which reveals the hidden truth. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels into Abraham's embrace. The rich man also died and was buried. In the parable the poor man dies before the rich one. This is a warning for the rich. During the time when the poor man is alive and at the door, there is still the possibility of salvation for the rich man. But when the poor man dies, the only instrument of salvation for the rich man also dies. Now, the poor man is in Abraham's embrace. The embrace of Abraham is the source of life, where the people of God were born. Lazarus, the poor man, is part of the people of Abraham, from which he was excluded when he was before the rich man's door. The rich man, who believes that he is a son of Abraham, does not go toward Abraham's embrace! The introduction to the parable ends here. Now its significance begins to be revealed, through the three conversations between the rich man and Father Abraham.
- Luke 16: 23-26: The first conversation. In the parable, Jesus opens a window on the other side of life, the side of God. It is not a question of Heaven. It is a question of the life which only faith generates and which the rich man, who has no faith, cannot see. It is only in the light of death that this ideology disintegrates; then appears as what the true value of life is. On the part of God, without the deceptive thinking of the ideology, things change. The rich man sees Lazarus in the arms of Abraham and asks to be helped in his suffering. The rich man discovers that Lazarus is his only possible benefactor. But now it is too late! The nameless rich man is pious, because he recognizes Abraham and calls him Father. Abraham responds and calls him son. In reality, this word of Abraham is addressed to all the rich who are alive. In so far as they are alive, they have the possibility of becoming sons and daughters of Abraham if they know how to open the door to Lazarus, the poor man, the only one who in God's name can help them. Salvation for the rich man does not consist in Lazarus giving him a drop of fresh water to refresh his tongue, but rather, that he, the rich man, open the closed door to the poor man so as fill the great abyss that exists.
- Luke 16: 27-29: The second conversation. The rich man insists: "Then, Father, I beg you to send Lazarus to my father's house, because I have five brothers!" The rich man does not want his brothers to end in this place of suffering. Lazarus, the poor man, is the only true intermediary between God and the rich. He is the only one, because it

is only to the poor that the rich have to return what they had and, thus, re-establish the justice which has been damaged! The rich man is worried for his brothers, but was never concerned about the poor! Abraham's response is clear: "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them!" They have the Bible! The rich man had the Bible. He knew it by heart. But he was never aware that the Bible had something to do with the poor. The rich man's key to understanding the Bible is the poor man sitting at his door!

- Luke 16: 30-31: The third conversation. "No, Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent!" The rich man recognizes that he is wrong, he has committed an error, because he speaks of repenting, something which he never heard during his life. He wants a miracle, a resurrection! But this type of resurrection does not exist. The only resurrection is that of Jesus. Jesus, risen from the dead comes to us in the person of the poor, of those who have no rights, of those who have no land, of those who have no food, of those who have no house, of those who have no health. In his final response, Abraham is clear and convincing: "If they will not listen either to Moses or to the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone should rise from the dead!" The conversation ends this way and is the end of the parable!

The key to understanding the sense of the Bible is the poor Lazarus, sitting before the door! God presents Himself in the person of the poor, sitting at our door, to help us cross the enormous abyss which the rich have created. Lazarus is also Jesus, the poor and servant Messiah, who was not accepted, but whose death changed all things radically. And everything changes in the light of the death of the poor. The place of torment, of torture, is the situation of the person without God. Even if the rich man thinks that he has religion and faith, in fact, he is not with God, because he does not open the door to the poor, as Zacchaeus did (Lk 19: 1-10).

Personal Questions

- How do we treat the poor? Do they have a name? In my attitude toward them, am I like Lazarus or like the rich man?
- When the poor come in contact with me, do they hear the Good News?
- Who do I consider are the poor? There are many kinds of poverty. Identifying these kinds of poverty should cause us to expand who we help, rather than limit us to "giving a donation" and not becoming personally involved.

Concluding Prayer

How blessed is anyone who rejects the advice of the wicked and does not take a stand in the path that sinners tread, nor a seat in company with cynics, but who delights in the law of Yahweh and meditates on His law day and night. (Ps 1: 1-2)

Friday, March 18, 2022

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

God, we do not want to die; we want to live.

We want to be happy but without paying the price. We belong to our times, when sacrifice and suffering are out of fashion. God, make our life worth living.

Give us back the age-old realization, that life means to be born again and again in pain, that it may become again a journey of hope to You, together with Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 21: 33-43, 45-46

Jesus said to the chief priests and the elders of the people: "Hear another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a hedge around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went on a journey. When vintage time drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to obtain his produce. But the tenants seized the servants and one they beat, another they killed, and a third they stoned. Again he sent other servants, more numerous than the first ones, but they treated them in the same way. Finally, he sent his son to them, thinking, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and acquire his inheritance.' They seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

What will the owner of the vineyard do to those tenants when he comes?" They answered him, "He will put those wretched men to a wretched death and lease his vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the proper times." Jesus said to them, "Did you never read in the Scriptures: The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; by the Lord has this been done, and it is wonderful in our eyes? Therefore, I say to you, the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit." When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they knew that he was speaking about them. And although they were attempting to arrest him, they feared the crowds, for they regarded him as a prophet.

Reflection

The text of today's Gospel forms part of a greater whole which includes Matthew 21: 23-40. The chief priests and the elders had asked Jesus by what authority He did those things (Mt 21: 23). They considered themselves the custodians of everything and they did not want anybody to do things without their permission. Jesus' answer is divided into three parts:

- 1) He, in turn, asks them a question because He wants to know, in their opinion, if John the Baptist was from heaven or from earth (Mt 21: 24-27);

- 2) He then tells them the parable of the two sons (Mt 21: 28-32);
- 3) He tells them the parable of the vineyard (Mt 21: 33-46), which is today's Gospel.
- Matthew 21: 33-40: The parable of the vineyard. Jesus begins as follows: "Listen to another parable: There was a man, a landowner, who planted a vineyard, he fenced it around, dug a winepress in it and built a tower." The parable is a beautiful summary of the history of Israel, taken from the prophet Isaiah (Is 5: 1-7). Jesus addresses Himself to the chief priests, to the elders (Mt 21: 23) and to the Pharisees (Mt 21: 45) and He gives a response to the question which they addressed to Him about the origin of His authority (Mt 21: 23). Through this parable, Jesus clarifies several things:
 - (a) He reveals the origin of His authority: He is the Son, the heir;
 - (b) He denounces the abuse of the authority of the tenants, that is of the priests and elders who were not concerned and did not take care of the people of God;
 - (c) He defends the authority of the prophets, sent by God, but who were killed by the priests and the elders;
 - (d) He unmasks the authority by which they manipulate the religion and kill the Son, because they do not want to lose the source of income which they have accumulated for themselves throughout the centuries.
- Matthew 21: 41: The sentence which they give to themselves. At the end of the parable Jesus asks: "Now, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They are not aware that the parable was speaking precisely of them. This is why, with the response that they give, they decree their own condemnation: "The chief priests and the elders of the people answered: 'He will bring those wretches to a wretched end and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will deliver the produce to him at the proper time.'" Several times Jesus uses this same method. He leads the person to tell the truth about himself, without knowing that he is condemning himself. For example, in the case of the Pharisee who condemns the young woman, considering her a sinner (Luke 7: 42-43), and in the case of the parable of the two sons (Mt 21: 28-32).
- Matthew 21: 42-46: The sentence given by themselves was confirmed by their behavior. From the clarification given by Jesus, the chief priests, the elders and the Pharisees understand that the parable is about them, but they do not convert. Rather, they keep to their own plan to kill Jesus. They will reject "the cornerstone." But they do not have the courage to do it openly because they fear the reaction of the people.

The diverse groups which held the power at the time of Jesus. In today's Gospel three groups appear, which, at that time, governed: the priests, the elders, and the Pharisees. Then, some brief information on the power which each of these groups and others possessed is given:

- The priests: They were the ones in charge of the worship in the Temple. The

people paid the Temple a tithe and other taxes and offerings. The High Priest occupied a very important place in the life of the nation, especially after the exile. He was chosen and appointed from among the three or four aristocratic families who possessed more power and riches.

- The elders or the Chief Priests of the People: They were the local leaders in the different villages of the city. Their origin came from the heads of the ancient tribes.
- The Sadducees: they were the lay aristocratic elite of society who wanted to maintain a priestly caste. Many of them were rich merchants or landlords. From the religious point of view they were liberal in their willingness to incorporate Hellenism into their lives. They did not accept the changes supported by the Pharisees, for example, faith in the resurrection and the existence of angels.
- The Pharisees: Pharisee means “separated.” They believed in the Oral Law handed down from Moses and that through the perfect observance of the Law of purity, people would succeed in being pure, separated and holy as the Law and Tradition demanded! Because of the exemplary witness of their life according to the norms of the time, their moral authority was widespread in the villages of Galilee.
- Scribe or doctor of the Law: They were the ones in charge of teaching. They dedicated their life to the study of the Law of God and taught people what to do to observe all the Law of God. Not all the Scribes belonged to the same line. Some were united with the Pharisees, others with the Sadducees.

Personal Questions

- Have you sometimes felt that you were unduly controlled or misunderstood? What was your reaction? Was it the same as that of Jesus?
- If Jesus returned today and told us the same parable, would it be as relevant? What would the reaction be from society and on a personal level?

Concluding Prayer

As far as heaven is above the earth, so strong is the faithful love of the Lord for those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far from us does He put our faults.
(Ps 103: 11-12)

Saturday, March 19, 2022

Joseph, the Spouse of Mary, the Mother of Jesus

LECTIO

Opening Prayer:

Spirit who moves over the water,
calm in us all discordance,
the agitated waves, the noise of the words,
the whirlwind of vanity,
and make the Word which recreates,
arise in silence.

Spirit who in a sigh you whisper
to our spirit the Name of the Father,
come and gather together all our desires,
make them grow in a beam of light
which will be a response to Your light,
the Word of the new Day.

Spirit of God, the sap of love
of the immense tree on which you graft us,
so that all our brothers and sisters
will seem to us as a gift
in the great Body in which
the Word of communion matures.

(Frère Pierre-Yves of Taizé)

Reading of the Gospel: Matthew 1: 16, 18-21, 24a

Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Of her was born Jesus who is called the Christ. Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly. Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home.

A Moment of Silence:

so that the Word of God may enter into our hearts and enlighten our lives.

MEDITATIO

A Key to the Reading:

The passage of today's Gospel is taken from the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew which forms part of the section concerning the conception, birth and infancy of Jesus. The center of all this account is the person of Jesus around which are all the events and the persons mentioned. One must keep in mind that the Gospel reveals a theology of the history of Jesus, and so getting close to the Word of God we should get the message which is hidden under the veils of the account without losing ourselves, as Paul so wisely advises us "in foolish speculations", avoiding "those genealogies and the quibbles and disputes about the Law, they are useless and futile" (Tt 3: 9).

In fact, this text is connected to the genealogy of Jesus, which Matthew arranges with the intention of stressing the dynastic succession of Jesus, the Savior of his people (Mt 1: 21). To Jesus are conferred all the rights inherited from the lineage of David, of "Joseph, son of David" (Mt 1: 20; Lk 2: 4-5) His legal father. For the Biblical and Hebrew world legal paternity was sufficient to confer all the rights of the lineage in question (cf.: the law of the levirate and of adoption (Dt 25: 5ff). That is why from the beginning of the genealogy, Jesus is designed as "Christ the Son of David" (Mt 1: 1) that is, the anointed one of the Lord Son of David, with whom all the promises of God to David His servant, are fulfilled (2 Sam 7: 1-16; 2 Cr 7: 18; 2 Cr 21: 7; Ps 89: 30). This is why Matthew adds to the account of the genealogy and of the conception of Jesus the prophecy of Isaiah: "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken through the prophet.: The young woman is with child and will give birth to a son whom she will call Immanuel, which means God with us" (Mt 1: 21-23 and Is 7: 14).

Let us stop to say something, on the spiritual reality of adoption, we can refer to the fact that the elected people possess "the glory, the covenants, the legislation, the cult, the promises", because "they are Israelites and possess the adoption of sons" (Rm 9: 4). But we also, the new people of God in Christ receive the adoption of children because "when the completion of the time came God sent His Son, born of a woman, born a subject of the Law, to redeem the subjects of the Law, so that we could receive adoption as children" (Gal 4: 4-5). This is the salvation which Jesus has brought to us. Christ "will save His people from their sins" (Mt 1: 21) because He is the "God with us!" (Mt 1: 23) who makes us adopted children of God.

Jesus is born from "Mary who was betrothed to Joseph" (Mt 1: 18a)) who "was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit" (Mt 1: 18b). Matthew does not give the account of the annunciation as Luke does (Lk 1: 26-38), but structures the account from the point of view of the experience of Joseph the just man. The Bible reveals to us that God loves the just and many times chooses them for an important mission, protects them and does not join them to the impious (Gen 18: 23ff). In the Old Testament we find many persons who are considered just. We think of Noah "a good man, an upright man among his contemporaries" (Gen 6: 9). Or also Johoash who "did what Yahweh regards as right" (2 K 12: 3).

A constant idea in the Bible is the "dream" as a privileged place where God makes His

plans and designs known, and sometimes reveals the future. The dreams of Jacob at Bethel are well known (Gen 28: 10ff) and Joseph his son, as also those of the cup-bearer and the chief baker imprisoned in Egypt with him (Gen 37: 5ff; Gen 40: 5ff) and the dreams of Pharaoh which revealed the future years of plenty and of famine and want (Gen 41: 1ff).

“An Angel of the Lord“ appeared to Joseph (Mt 1: 20) to reveal to him God’s design. In the Gospels of the infancy frequently the Angel of the Lord is mentioned as the heavenly messenger (Mt 1: 20, 24; 2: 13, 19; Lk 1: 11; 2, 9) and also on other occasions the angel appears to calm, to reveal the plans of God, to heal and to liberate from slavery (cf. Mt 28: 2; Jn 5: 4; Acts 5: 19; 8: 26; 12: 7, 23). Many are the references to the Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament where originally the angel represented the Lord himself who guided and protected His people being close to them (cf. Gen 16: 7-16; 22: 12; 24: 7; Ex 3: 3; 23: 20; Tb 5: 4).

Questions to Orient the Meditation and Make it Relevant:

- What is the most important thing to you in this passage? Why?
- In the key to the reading, consideration is given to some terms (adoption, angel, dream, just). What thoughts did these raise in your heart? What relevance can they have for your journey of spiritual maturation?

ORATIO

Psalm 92

It is good to give thanks to Yahweh,
to make music for Your name, Most High,
to proclaim Your faithful love at daybreak,
and Your constancy all through the night,
on the lyre, the ten-stringed lyre,
to the murmur of the harp.
You have brought me joy, Yahweh,
by Your deeds, at the work of Your hands I cry out,
'How great are Your works, Yahweh,
immensely deep Your thoughts!'

Stupid people cannot realize this,
fools do not grasp it.
The wicked may sprout like weeds,
and every evil-doer flourish,
but only to be eternally destroyed;
whereas You are supreme for ever, Yahweh.

Look how Your enemies perish,
how all evil-doers are scattered!
You give me the strength of the wild ox,

You anoint me with fresh oil;
I caught sight of the ambush against me,
overheard the plans of the wicked.

The upright will flourish like the palm tree,
will grow like a cedar of Lebanon.
Planted in the house of Yahweh,
they will flourish in the courts of our God.
In old age they will still bear fruit,
will remain fresh and green,
to proclaim Yahweh's integrity;
my rock, in whom no fault can be found.

Moments for a Prayerful Silence

CONTEMPLATIO

The Christian contemplation of God's dream, of the plan which God cherishes for the history of humanity does not produce alienation but keeps the consciences vigilant and active and stimulates us to face with courage and altruism the responsibilities which life gives us.

Sunday, March 20, 2022

Third Sunday of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, send Your Spirit to help us to read the scriptures with the same mind that You read them to the disciples on the way to Emmaus. In the light of the Word, written in the bible, You helped them to discover the presence of God in the disturbing events of Your sentence and death. Thus, the cross that seemed to be the end of all hope became for them the source of life and of resurrection.

Create silence in us so that we may listen to Your voice in creation and in the scriptures, in events and in people, above all in the poor and suffering. May Your word guide us so that we too, like the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, may experience the force of Your resurrection and witness to others that You are alive in our midst as source of fraternity, justice, and peace. We ask this of You, Jesus, son of Mary, who revealed the Father to us and sent us Your Spirit. Amen.

Gospel Reading – Luke 13:1-9

A Key to the Reading:

The text of the third Sunday of Lent puts before us two different but related facts: Jesus comments on the events of the day and He narrates a parable. Luke 13: 1-5: At the

people's request, Jesus comments on the events of the day: the massacre of pilgrims by Pilate and the massacre at the tower of Siloam where eighteen people were killed. Luke 13: 9: Jesus tells a parable about the fig tree that bore no fruit.

As you read, it is good to note two things:

- See how Jesus contradicts the popular interpretation of what is happening
- See whether there is a connection between the parable and the comment on the events of the day.

A Division of the Text to Help with the Reading:

- Luke 13: 1: The people tell Jesus about the massacre of the Galileans
- Luke 13: 2-3: Jesus comments on the massacre and draws a lesson from there for the people
- Luke 13: 4-5: To support His thinking, Jesus comments on another event
- Luke 13: 6-9: The parable of the fig tree that did not bear fruit

Text:

Some people told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with the blood of their sacrifices. Jesus said to them in reply, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were greater sinners than all other Galileans? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did! Or those eighteen people who were killed when the tower at Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than everyone else who lived in Jerusalem? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!" And he told them this parable: "There once was a person who had a fig tree planted in his orchard, and when he came in search of fruit on it but found none, he said to the gardener, 'For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree but have found none. So cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?' He said to him in reply, 'Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future. If not, you can cut it down.'"

A moment of Prayerful Silence

so that the Word of God may penetrate and enlighten our life.

Some Questions

to help us in our personal reflection.

- What struck or pleased you most in this text? Why?
- What was the popular interpretation of these two events?
- How does Jesus disagree with the popular interpretation of the events?

- What is the meaning of the parable? Is there a connection between the parable and the comments on the events?
- What is this text's message for us who have to interpret the signs of the times today?

To Go Deeper into the Theme

The Literary and Historical Context of Then and Now:

Luke writes his Gospel about 85 A.D. for the Christian communities in Greece. Generally, he follows the narrative in Mark's Gospel. Here and there he introduces some minor differences or changes some words so as to adapt the narrative to his purpose. Apart from Mark's Gospel, Luke also consults other books and has access to other sources: eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word (Lk 1: 2). All the material that is not found in Mark, Luke organizes into a literary form: Jesus is on a long journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. There is a description of the journey in Luke 9: 51 to 19: 28 and this includes ten chapters or one third of the Gospel!

In these chapters, Luke constantly reminds his readers that Jesus is on a journey. He rarely tells us where Jesus is, but he lets us know clearly that Jesus is traveling, and that the end of the journey is Jerusalem where He will die in accordance with what the prophets had foretold (Lk 9: 51, 53, 57; 10: 1, 38; 11: 1; 13: 22, 33; 14: 25; 17: 11; 18: 31, 35; 19: 1, 11, 28). And even after Jesus reaches Jerusalem, Luke goes on talking of a journey to the center (Lk 19: 29, 41, 45; 20: 1). Just before the journey begins, on the occasion of the Transfiguration with Moses and Elijah on the mountain, the journey to Jerusalem is considered as an *exodus* for Jesus (Lk 9: 31) and as an *ascension or climbing up to heaven* (Lk 9: 51). In the Old Testament, Moses had led the first exodus liberating people from Pharaoh's oppression (Ex 3: 10-12) and the prophet Elijah went up to heaven (2 Kings 2: 11). Jesus is the new Moses who comes to liberate people from the oppression of the law. He is the new Elijah who comes to prepare the coming of the Kingdom.

The description of Jesus' long journey to Jerusalem is not just a literary device to introduce the material proper to Luke. It also reflects the long and arduous journey that the communities in Greece were going through in their daily lives in Luke's time: passing from a rural world in Palestine to a cosmopolitan environment in the Greek culture at the edges of the great cities of Asia and Europe. This passage or inculturation was marked by a strong tension between the Christians from Judaism and the new converts who came from other ethnic and cultural groups. Indeed, the description of the long journey to Jerusalem reflects the painful process of conversion that people connected to Judaism had to make: to leave the world of the observance of the law that accused and condemned them, to go towards a world of the gratuitous love of God to all peoples, to the certainty that in Christ all peoples meld into one before God; to leave the closed world of a race to go towards the universal territory of humanity. This is also the journey of our lives. Are we capable of transforming the crosses of life into an exodus of liberation?

A Commentary on the Text:

- Luke 13: 1: The people inform Jesus of the massacre of the Galileans.

Like today, people pass on comments on the events that happen and want to hear comments from those who can form public opinion. That is why some people went to Jesus to tell Him of the massacre of some Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with that of their sacrifices. It was probably the assassination that took place on Mount Gerazim, which was still a place of pilgrimage and where people went to offer sacrifices. This event underlines the ferocity and stupidity of some Roman rulers in Palestine who provoked the religious sensibility of the Jews through irrational actions such as this.

- Luke 13: 2-3: Jesus comments on the massacre and draws a lesson for the people.

Asked to give an opinion, Jesus asks: "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than any others that this should happen to them?" Jesus' question reflects the popular interpretation common then: suffering and violent death are punishment from God for some sin committed by that person. Jesus' reaction is categorical: "They were not I tell you. No!" He denies the popular interpretation and transforms the event into an examination of conscience: "unless you repent you will all perish as they did". In other words, unless there is a real and proper change, the same massacre will overtake all. Later history confirmed Jesus' foresight. The change did not take place. They were not converted and forty years later, in 70, Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans. Many people were massacred. Jesus saw the gravity of the political situation of His country. On the one hand, there was the ever heavier and unbearable Roman domination. On the other, there was the official religion, which was growing more and more alienated without understanding the importance of the faith in Yahweh in the lives of the people.

- Luke 13: 4-5: In support of His thinking, Jesus comments on more than one event. Jesus takes the initiative of commenting on another event. A blizzard causes the tower of Siloam to crumble and eighteen people are crushed by the stones. People thought that it was "a punishment from God!" Jesus' comment is: "No, I tell you, but unless you repent you will all perish as they did". His concern is to interpret events in such a way that God's call to change and conversion becomes transparent. Jesus is a mystic, a contemplative. He reads events in a different way. He can read and interpret the signs of the times. For Him, the world is transparent, revealing the presence and call of God.
- Luke 13: 6-9: The parable of the fig tree that bears no fruit.

Jesus then tells the parable of the fig tree that bears no fruit. A man had planted a fig tree in his vineyard. For three years the tree bore no fruit. So he says to his vinedresser: "Cut it down". But the vinedresser replies: "Leave it one more year....it may bear fruit next year; if not, then you can cut it down." We do not know whether Jesus told this parable immediately after His comments on the massacre and the crumbling of the tower of Siloam. It was probably Luke who placed this parable here, because Luke sees a connection between the comments on the events and the parable of the fig tree. Luke does not say what this connection is. He leaves us to discover this. What meaning does Luke see? I shall dare to give an opinion. You may discover another meaning. The owner of the vineyard and of the fig tree is God. The

fig tree represents the people. Jesus is the vinedresser. The owner of the vineyard has grown tired of looking for fruit from the fig tree and finding none. He decides to uproot the tree. Thus, there will be more room for another plant that may bear fruit. The chosen people were not producing the fruit that God expected. He wants to pass on the Good News to the pagans. Jesus is the vinedresser who asks that the fig tree be spared a little longer. He will redouble His efforts to obtain a change and a conversion. Later in the Gospel, Jesus recognizes that His redoubled efforts have borne no result. They will not be converted. Jesus mourns the lack of conversion and weeps over the city of Jerusalem. (Lk 19: 41-44).

Further Information:

A short history of the popular resistance against the Romans in Jesus' time

In this Sunday's Gospel, Luke makes clear allusions to the repression of the Roman legions against the popular resistance of the Galileans. Hence we give a schematic overview of the popular resistance of Judeans against the Roman domination. Over the years this resistance grew deeper and took root in the faith of the people. Here is an outline that runs parallel with Jesus' life:

- From 63 to 37 before Christ: *A popular revolt without any clear direction*. In 63 before Christ, the Roman Empire invaded Palestine and imposed a peasant tribute. From 57 to 37, in just 20 years, six rebellions broke out in Galilee! The people, aimless, followed anyone who promised to liberate them from the Roman tribute.
- From 37 to 4 before Christ: *Repression and dislocation*. This is the time of the government of Herod, called *The Great*. He is the one who killed the innocents in Bethlehem (Mt 2: 16). Brutal repression prevented any kind of popular manifestation. Herod thus promoted the so-called *Pax Romana*. This peace gave the Empire a certain economic stability, but for the oppressed people it was the peace of a cemetery.
- From 4 to 6 after Christ: *Messianic revolutions*. This is the period of Archelaus' government in Judea. On the day he took power, he massacred 3000 people in the Temple square. The revolution exploded all over the country, but it was aimless. The popular leaders at this time were seeking for motives connected with ancient tradition and presented themselves as messianic kings. The Roman repression destroyed Seffis, the capital of Galilee. Violence was the mark of Jesus' childhood. In the ten years of Archelaus' government, He saw Palestine go through one of the most violent periods of its history.
- From 6 to 27: *Zeal for the law: A time for revision*. In the year 6, Herod Agrippa I deposed Archelaus and transformed Judea into a Roman Province, decreeing a census so as to make sure that the tribute was paid. The census produced a strong popular reaction inspired by *Zeal for the Law*. This Zeal (hence the term *zealots*) urged people to boycott and not pay the tribute. This was a new form of resistance, a kind of civil disobedience that spread like a repressed fire under embers. However, *Zeal* had a limited vision. The "zealots" ran the danger of reducing the observance of the Law to

opposition to the Romans. It was precisely during this period that Jesus grew in awareness of His mission.

- From 27 to 69: *The prophets reappear*. After these 20 years, from 6 to 26, the revision of the aim of the journey appears with the preaching of the prophets who represented a step forward in the popular movement. The prophets called the people together and invited them to conversion and change. They wanted to reform history from its origins. They gathered the people in the desert (Mk 1: 4), to begin a new exodus, proclaimed by Isaiah (Isa 43: 16-21). The first was John the Baptist (Mt 11: 9; 14: 5; Lk 1: 76), who drew many people (Mt 3: 5-7). Soon after, Jesus came on the scene and was considered by the people to be a prophet (Mt 16: 14; 21: 11, 46; Lk 7: 16). Jesus, like Moses, proclaimed the New Law on the mountain (Mt 5: 1) and nourished the people in the desert (Mk 6: 30- 44). Like the fall of the walls of Jericho towards the end of the forty years in the desert (Is 6: 20), so also, Jesus proclaimed the fall of the walls of Jerusalem (Lk 19: 44; Mt 24: 2). Like the prophets of old, Jesus proclaimed the liberation of the oppressed and the beginning of a new *jubilee* year (Lk 4: 18-19), and asked for a change in the way of life (Mk 1: 15; Lk 13: 3, 5).

There are other prophets after Jesus. That is why *revolution, messianism and zeal* continue to exist simultaneously. The authorities of the time, Romans and Herodians, as also priests, scribes and Pharisees, all concerned with the security of the temple and the nation (Jn 11: 48) and with the observance of the law (Mt 23: 1-23), could not see the difference between *prophets* and other popular leaders. For them they were all the same. They mistook Jesus for a messianic king (Lk 23: 2, 5). Gamaliel, the great doctor of the law, for instance, compared Jesus with Judas, leader of the *revolutionaries* (Acts 5: 35-37). Flavius Josephus himself, the historian, mistook the prophets for "thieves and impostors". Today we would say that they were all "good for nothing"!

Praying Psalm 82 (81)

God warns human authorities

God takes His stand in the divine assembly, surrounded by the gods He gives judgment.

'How much longer will you give unjust judgments and uphold the prestige of the wicked?

Let the weak and the orphan have justice, be fair to the wretched and the destitute.

'Rescue the weak and the needy,

save them from the clutches of the wicked.

'Ignorant and uncomprehending, they wander in darkness,

while the foundations of the world are tottering. I had thought, "Are you gods,

are all of you sons of the Most High?" No! you will die as human beings do, as one man, princes, you will fall.'

Arise, God, judge the world,

for all nations belong to You.

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank You for the word that has enabled us to understand better the will of the Father. May Your Spirit enlighten our actions and grant us the strength to practice what Your Word has revealed to us. May we, like Mary, Your mother, not only listen to but also practice the Word. You who live and reign with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

Monday, March 21

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Just and holy God, our loving Father,

You offered us Your hand in friendship and You sent us Your Son Jesus to go with us on the road of obedience and loyalty.

God, we often hurt this friendship; we act as if we were not Your sons and daughters. See the look of shame on our faces. Forgive us, for we count on You.

Accept our thanks for continuing to take us as we are and loving us notwithstanding our sins.

We ask You this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Luke 4:24-30

Jesus said to the people in the synagogue at Nazareth: "Amen, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own native place. Indeed, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah when the sky was closed for three and a half years and a severe famine spread over the entire land. It was to none of these that Elijah was sent, but only to a widow in Zarephath in the land of Sidon. Again, there were many lepers in Israel during the time of Elisha the prophet; yet not one of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." When the people in the synagogue heard this, they were all filled with fury. They rose up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town had been built, to hurl him down headlong. But he passed through the midst of them and went away.

Reflection

Today's Gospel (Lk 4: 24-30) forms part of a larger part (Lk 4: 14-32). Jesus had presented His program in the synagogue of Nazareth, using a text from Isaiah which spoke about the poor, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed (Is 61: 1-2) and which mirrored the situation of the people of Galilee at the time of Jesus. In the name of God, Jesus takes a stand and defines His mission: to proclaim the Good News to the poor, to proclaim

release to prisoners, to give back sight to the blind, to restore liberty to the oppressed. After finishing the reading, He updates the text and says, "Today this text is being fulfilled even while you are listening!" (Lk 4: 21). All those present were astonished (Lk 4: 16, 22b). But immediately after there was a reaction to discredit. The people in the synagogue were scandalized and did not want to know anything about Jesus. They said, "Is He not the son of Joseph?" (Lk 4: 22b). Why were they scandalized? What is the reason for this [unexpected] reaction?

Because Jesus quoted the text from Isaiah only to the part that says, "to proclaim a year of favor from the Lord," and He omits the end of the sentence, which says, "to proclaim a day of vengeance for our God" (Is 61: 2). The people of Nazareth remained surprised because Jesus omitted the phrase on vengeance. They wanted the Good News of the liberation of the oppressed to be an action of vengeance on the part of God against the oppressors. In this case the coming of the Kingdom would be only a superficial social change, and not a change or conversion of the system. Jesus does not accept this way of thinking. His experience of God the Father helps Him to understand better the significance of the prophecies. He takes away the vengeance. The people of Nazareth do not accept that proposal, and the authority of Jesus begins to diminish: "Is He not Joseph's son?"

- Luke 4: 24: No prophet is ever accepted in his own country. Jesus answers, "No prophet is ever accepted in his own country!" In fact, they did not accept the new image of God which Jesus communicated to them through this new and freer interpretation of Isaiah. The message of the God of Jesus went beyond the limits of the Jewish people and opened itself to accept the excluded and all humanity.
- Luke 4: 25-27: Two stories of the Old Testament. In order to help the community to get beyond the scandal and to understand the universality of God, Jesus uses two well known stories of the Old Testament: one of Elijah and the other one of Elisha. Through these stories He criticized the people of Nazareth who were so closed up in themselves. Elijah was sent to the foreign widow of Zarephah (1 Kg 17: 7-16). Elisha was sent to take care of Naaman of Syria (2 Kg 5: 14). The people of Nazareth felt threatened by this. Paul makes a similar statement with similar results too (Acts 22: 21)
- Luke 4: 28-30: They intended to throw Him off the cliff, but He passed straight through the crowd and walked away. What Jesus said did not calm the people down. On the contrary! The use of these two biblical passages caused them to become more angry. The community of Nazareth reached the point of wanting to kill Jesus. And thus, at the moment in which He presented His plan to accept the excluded, Jesus Himself was excluded! But He remained calm! The anger of the others did not make Him change His mind. In this way, Luke indicates that it is difficult to overcome the mentality of privilege which is closed up in itself. And he showed that the polemic attitude of the gentiles had already existed in the time of Jesus. Jesus had the same difficulty which Luke had with the Hebrew community in his time.

Personal Questions

- How do I carry on the gift of the Good News in the world today?
- Who are the excluded whom we should accept more warmly in our community?
- Does taking on poverty, oppression, or blindness (in all its forms) start on a personal level and spread to my community, or do I wait for the community to act before taking personal action?

Concluding Prayer

My whole being yearns and pines for Yahweh's courts; My heart and my body cry out for joy to the living God. (Ps 84: 2)

Tuesday, March 22, 2022

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord God,

You want us to live our faith not so much as a set of rules and practices but as a relationship from person to person with You and with people. Keep our hearts turned to You, that we may live what we believe and that we may express our love for You in terms of service to those around us, as Jesus did, Your Son, who lives with You and the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 18: 21-35

Peter approached Jesus and asked him, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus answered, "I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times. That is why the Kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the accounting, a debtor was brought before him who owed him a huge amount. Since he had no way of paying it back, his master ordered him to be sold, along with his wife, his children, and all his property, in payment of the debt. At that, the servant fell down, did him homage, and said, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.' Moved with compassion the master of that servant let him go and forgave him the loan. When that servant had left, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a much smaller amount. He seized him and started to choke him, demanding, 'Pay back what you owe.' Falling to his knees, his fellow servant begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he had him put in prison until he paid back the debt. Now when his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were deeply disturbed, and went to their master and reported the whole affair. His master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to. Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?' Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole

debt. So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart."

Reflection

Today's Gospel speaks to us about the need for pardon. It is not easy to forgive, because certain grief and pain continue to burn in the heart. There are people who say, "I forgive, but I do not forget!" Rancor, tensions, diverse opinions, insults, offenses, provocations, all renders pardon and reconciliation difficult. Let us try to meditate on the words of Jesus which speak about reconciliation (Mt 18: 21-22) and which speak to us about the parable of pardon without limits (Mt 18: 23-35).

- Matthew 18:21-22: To forgive seventy-seven times! Jesus had spoken of the importance of pardon and of the need of knowing how to accept the brothers and sisters to help them to reconcile with the community (Mt 18:15-20) Prior to these words of Jesus, Peter asks, "How often should I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?" Number seven indicates perfection. In this case, it was synonymous with always. Jesus goes far beyond Peter's proposal. He eliminates any possibility of limitation to pardon: "Not seven, I tell you, but seventy-seven times!" That is, seventy times always! There is no proportion between the pardon which we receive from God and the pardon which we should offer to our brother or sister, as the parable of pardon without limit teaches us.
- The expression seventy-seven times was a clear reference to the words of Lamech who said, "I killed a man for wounding me, a boy for striking me. Seven fold vengeance for Cain but seventy-seven fold for Lamech" (Gen 4: 23-24). Jesus wants to invert the spiral of violence which entered the world because of the disobedience of Adam and Eve, because of the killing of Abel by Cain and for the vengeance of Lamech. When uncontrolled violence invades life, everything goes wrong and life disintegrates.
- Matthew 18: 23-35: The parable of pardon without limits. The denarii was the coin in daily use at the time. 1 talent equaled 3,000 shekel or 6,000 denarii. Thus, the debt of ten thousand talents was approximately 60,000,000 denarii! There is no comparison between the two! Even if the debtor together with his wife and children set to work their whole life, they would never be capable of earning this much. Before God's love, which forgives gratuitously our debt of 60 million, it is more than just on our part to forgive gratuitously the debt of a single coin, seventy times always! The only limit to the gratuity of pardon of God is our incapacity to forgive our brother! (Mt 18: 33-34; 6: 15)

The community, an alternative place of solidarity and fraternity: the society of the Roman Empire was hard and without a heart, without any room for the little ones. They sought refuge for the heart and did not find it. The synagogue was also demanding and did not offer them any place. And in the Christian communities, the rigor of some in the observance of the Law made life together difficult because they used the same criteria as the synagogue. Besides this, toward the end of the first

century, in the Christian communities, the same divisions which existed in society between rich and poor began to appear (Jas 2:1-9). Instead of making the community a place of acceptance, they ran the risk of becoming a place of condemnation and conflict. Matthew wants to enlighten the communities, so that these may be an alternative space of solidarity and of fraternity. They should be Good News for the poor.

Personal Questions

- Why is it so difficult to forgive?
- How do we accomplish reconciliation in our community?
- What is the best way to approach forgiveness and forgetting while still protecting the vulnerable in our care or in our community?

Concluding Prayer

Direct me in Your ways, Yahweh, and teach me Your paths.

Encourage me to walk in Your truth and teach me, since You are the God who saves me. For my hope is in You all day long. (Ps 25: 4-5)

Wednesday, March 23, 2022

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,

Your prophets remind us in season and out of season of our responsibilities toward You and toward the world of people.

When they disturb and upset us, let it be a holy disturbance that makes us restless, eager to do Your will and to bring justice and love around us.

We ask You this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 5: 17-19

Jesus said to his disciples: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. Amen, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law, until all things have taken place. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called least in the Kingdom of heaven. But whoever obeys and teaches these commandments will be called greatest in the Kingdom of heaven."

Reflection

Today's Gospel (Mt 5: 17-19) teaches how to observe the law of God in its complete fulfillment (Mt 5: 17-19). Matthew writes in order to help the communities of converted Jews overcome the criticism of the brothers of their own race who accused them, saying, "You are unfaithful to the Law of Moses." Jesus Himself had been accused of infidelity to the Law of God. Matthew has Jesus' clarifying response to His accusers. Thus, Matthew sheds some light to help the communities solve their problems.

Using images of daily life, with simple and direct words, Jesus had said that the mission of the community, its reason for being, is that of being salt and light! He had given some advice regarding each one of the two images. Then follow the brief verses of today's Gospel.

- Matthew 5: 17-18: Not one dot, nor one stroke is to disappear from the Law. There were several different tendencies in the first Christian communities. Some thought that it was not necessary to observe the laws of the Old Testament, because we are saved by faith in Jesus and not by the observance of the Law (Rm 3: 21-26). Others accepted Jesus, the Messiah, but they did not accept the liberty of spirit with which some of the communities lived the message of Jesus. They thought that being Jews, they had to continue to observe the laws of the Old Testament (Acts 15: 1, 5). But there were Christians who lived so fully in the freedom of the Spirit, who no longer looked at the life of Jesus of Nazareth, nor to the Old Testament that they even went so far as to say, "Anathema Jesus!" (1 Cor 12: 3). Observing these tensions, Matthew tries to find some balance between both extremes. The community should be a place where the balance can be attained and lived. Jesus' answer to those who criticized Him continued to be relevant for the communities: "I have not come to abolish the law, but to complete it!" The communities could not be against the Law, nor could they close themselves off in the observance of the Law. Like Jesus, they should advance and show in practice, the objective that the Law wanted to attain in people's lives, that is, in the perfect practice of love.
- Matthew 5: 17-18: Not one dot or stroke will disappear from the Law. It is for those who wanted to get rid of the law altogether that Matthew recalls the other parable of Jesus: "Anyone who breaks even one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be considered the least in the Kingdom of Heaven; but the person who keeps them and teaches them will be considered great in the Kingdom of Heaven." The great concern in Matthew's Gospel is to show that the Old Testament, Jesus of Nazareth, and the life in the Spirit cannot be separated. The three of them form part of the same and unique plan of God and communicate to us the certainty of faith: The God of Abraham and of Sarah is present in the midst of the community by faith in Jesus of Nazareth who sends us His Spirit.

Personal Questions

- How do I see and live God's law: as a freedom to do anything I please, as an imposition which restricts me, or as a guide to grow in love?

- What can we do today for our brothers and sisters who consider all of this type of discussion as obsolete and not relevant?
- How does this view of the Law and the Commandments affect me? As a line which defines sin, as rules to avoid vice, or as a guide in attaining virtue?

Concluding Prayer

Praise Yahweh, Jerusalem, Zion, praise your God.

For He gives strength to the bars of your gates, He blesses your children within you. (Ps 145: 12-13)

Thursday, March 24, 2022

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,

many of us never had it so good and so we have become smug and self-satisfied, happy in our own little world.

God, may our ears remain open to Your word and our hearts to You and to our brothers and sisters. Do not allow us to forget You, or to place our trust in ourselves. Make us restless for You through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Luke 11: 14-23

Jesus was driving out a demon that was mute, and when the demon had gone out, the mute man spoke and the crowds were amazed. Some of them said, "By the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons, he drives out demons." Others, to test him, asked him for a sign from heaven. But he knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be laid waste and house will fall against house. And if Satan is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that it is by Beelzebul that I drive out demons. If I, then, drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own people drive them out? Therefore, they will be your judges. But if it is by the finger of God that I drive out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you. When a strong man fully armed guards his palace, his possessions are safe. But when one stronger than he attacks and overcomes him, he takes away the armor on which he relied and distributes the spoils. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters."

Reflection

Today's Gospel is that of Luke. We already meditated on the parallel text in Mark (Mk

3: 22-27) during January.

- Luke 11: 14-16: The diverse reactions before the expulsion of a devil. Jesus had expelled a devil which was mute. The expulsion produced two different reactions. On the one side, the crowd of people who remain astonished and surprised. The people accept Jesus and believe in Him. On the other side, those who do not accept Jesus and do not believe in Him. Among the latter, some said that Jesus cast out devils in the name of Beelzebul, the prince of devils, and others wanted a sign from heaven. Mark says that it was a question of the Scribes who had come from Jerusalem (Mk 3: 22), who were not in agreement with the liberty of Jesus. They wanted to defend tradition against the message of Jesus.
- Luke 11: 17-22: Jesus' answer is divided into three parts:
 - 1st part: Comparison with a divided kingdom. (11: 17-18a) Jesus denounces the absurdity of the calumny of the Scribes. To say that he casts out devils with the help of the prince of devils means to deny the evidence. It is the same thing as saying that water is dry and that the sun is darkness. The doctors of Jerusalem slandered Him because they did not know how to explain the benefits which Jesus accomplished for the people. They were afraid to lose their position of leadership. They felt threatened in their authority before the people.
 - 2nd part: through whom do your own sons drive them out? (11: 18b-20) Jesus provokes the accusers and asks, "But if it is through Beelzebul that I drive out devils, in whose name do your disciples drive them out? Let them respond and explain themselves! If I drive out the devil through the finger of God, then the Kingdom of God has indeed caught you unawares."
 - 3rd part: when someone stronger than himself attacks and defeats him, the stronger one takes away all weapons. (11: 21-22) Jesus compares the devil to a strong man. Nobody, except a stronger person, can rob the house of a strong man: Jesus is the strongest. This is why He succeeds in entering the house and in getting hold of the strong man. He succeeds in driving out the devils. Jesus seizes the strong man and now robs his house, that is, He liberates the people who were under the power of evil. The Prophet Isaiah had used the same comparison to describe the coming of the Messiah (Is 49: 24-25). This is why Luke says that the expulsion of the devil is an obvious sign that the Kingdom of God has arrived.
- Luke 11: 23: Anyone who is not with Me is against Me. Jesus ends His response with this sentence: "Anyone who is not with Me is against Me. And anyone who does not gather in with Me throws away." On another occasion, also regarding the expulsion of a devil, the disciples prevented a man from using the name of Jesus to drive out the devil because he was not one of their group. Jesus answered, "You must not stop him: anyone who is not against you is for you!" (Lk 9: 50). These two declarations seem to be contradictory, but they are not. The sentence in today's Gospel is directed to the enemies who have a prejudice against Jesus: "Anyone who is not with Me is against Me. And anyone who does not gather in with Me throws away." The prejudice

and the lack of acceptance make dialogue impossible and break the union. The other sentence is addressed to the disciples who thought they had the monopoly on Jesus. "Anyone who is not against you is for you!" Many people who are not Christian practice love, goodness, justice, many times in a much better way than Christians. We must not exclude them. They are brothers and workers in the construction of the Kingdom. We Christians are not Jesus' owners. On the contrary, Jesus is our Lord!

Personal Questions

- To be "with Me" or "against Me" can become a complex question. At what point in belief or action would a person move from being "with" to "against" Jesus and his message?
- "Do not stop him, because anyone who is not against you is for you!" How does this apply to the various Christian interpretations of Jesus' message today?

Concluding Prayer

Come, let us cry out with joy to Yahweh, acclaim the rock of our salvation.

Let us come into His presence with thanksgiving, acclaim Him with music. (Ps 95: 1-2)

Friday, March 25, 2022

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Merciful Father, in this holy time of prayer and of listening to Your Word, send also to me Your holy angel that I may receive the proclamation of salvation and that, after opening my heart, I may offer my yes to Love. Let, I beg You, the Holy Spirit overshadow me as an overwhelming power. From now on, Father, I do not wish to express anything other than my "Yes!" and to say to You: "Behold, I am here for You. Do unto me whatever pleases You." Amen.

Gospel Reading - Luke 1:26-38

The Context of the Passage:

The story of the annunciation takes us from the temple, a holy place par excellence, to the house, to the intimacy of a personal meeting of God with His creature; it leads us into ourselves, into the deepest part of our being and our story, where God alone can reach and touch us. The announcement of the birth of John the Baptist had opened the sterile womb of Elizabeth, thus overcoming the absolute powerlessness of humankind and transforming it into the ability to collaborate with God. On the other hand, the announcement of the birth of Jesus, knocks on the door of a fertile womb of the one who is “full of grace” and awaits a reply: it is God who waits for our yes so as to work everything in us.

An Aid to the Reading of this Passage:

- vv. 26-27: The first two verses place us at the time and sacred space of the event on which we are meditating and which we relive: we are in the sixth month from the conception of John the Baptist and in Nazareth, a city in Galilee, the land of the marginalized and unclean. Here God has come down to speak with a virgin, to speak to our hearts.

The people involved in this unsettling event are presented to us: Gabriel, the messenger of God, a young woman called Mary and her spouse Joseph of the royal house of David. We too are made welcome into this company and are called to enter into the mystery.

- vv. 28-29: These are the very first words of the dialogue between God and His creature: just a few words, a mere breath, but all-powerful words that disturb the heart, that question deeply the meaning of human life, plans and expectations. The angel announces joy, grace and the presence of God; Mary is disturbed and asks herself how can any of this be happening to her. Where can such a joy come from? How can such a great grace, that can change her very being, be hers?
- vv. 30-33: These are the central verses of the excerpt: it is the explosion of the announcement, the manifestation of the gift of God, of His omnipotence in the life of human beings. Gabriel, the strong, speaks of Jesus: the eternal king, the Savior, the God made child, the humble all-powerful. He speaks of Mary, of her womb, of her life that she was chosen to be the gateway to welcoming God in this world and into the lives of all people. Even at this stage of the events, God begins to draw near, to knock. He stands, attentive, by the door of the heart of Mary, and even now by our house, our hearts...
- v. 34: Mary, faced with God's proposal, allows herself to stand naked. She allows herself to be read to her very depths. She speaks of herself, her heart, her wishes. She knows that for God the impossible is possible; she does not doubt or harden her heart and mind; she does not count the cost; she only wants to be fully available, open, and allows herself to be reached by that

humanly impossible touch, but one already written, already realized in God. In a gesture of utter poverty, she places before God her virginity, her not knowing man. This is a complete and absolute surrender of self, full of faith and trust. It is her preliminary yes.

- vv. 35-37: God, most humble, gives an answer; the all-powerful bends over the fragility of this woman, who represents each one of us. The dialogue continues; the covenant grows and is strengthened. God reveals the how. He speaks of the Holy Spirit, of the fruitful overshadowing, which does no violence, does not break, but preserves intact. He speaks of the human experience of Elizabeth. He reveals another impossible thing made possible; almost like a guarantee or security. And then comes the last word when one must make a choice: to say yes or no, believe or doubt, dissolve or harden oneself, to open the door or close it. "Nothing is impossible for God."
- v. 38: The last verse seems to contain an infinity. Mary says her "Here I am." She opens herself wide to God and then the meeting, the union takes place forever. God enters into the human and the human becomes the place of God: these are the most sublime nuptials possible on earth. And yet, the Gospel ends on a sad and hard note: Mary stays alone; the angel leaves. What remains, however, is the yes pronounced to God and God's presence; what remains is real life.

The Text:

The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, "Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you." But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his Kingdom there will be no end." But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" And the angel said to her in reply, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God." Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

I have read and listened to the words of the Gospel. Now I stand in silence ... God is present, at the door, and asks for shelter, yes, even from me and from my poor life ...

A Few Questions

- God's announcement, His angel, enters my life, stands before me and speaks to me. Am I prepared to welcome Him, to give Him space, to listen to Him attentively?
- Suddenly I receive an upsetting announcement. God speaks to me of joy, grace and presence: all the things that I have been seeking for so long, always. Who can make me really happy? Am I willing to trust in His happiness and His presence?
- Not much is needed, just a movement of the heart, of my being; He is already aware of this. He is already overwhelming me with light and love. He says to me, "You have found favor in My sight." So, I please God? He finds me pleasant, loveable? Yes, that is how it really is. Why is it that I would not believe it before? Why have I not listened to Him?
- The Lord Jesus wants to come into this world also through me; He wants to reach my brothers and sisters through the paths of my life, of my being. Would I lead Him astray? Would I refuse Him, keep Him at a distance? Would I wipe Him out of my story, my life?

A Key to the Reading

Some Important and Strong Words that Resonate in This Gospel Passage.

- ***Rejoice!***

This is a really strange greeting from God to His creature; it seems hard to explain and perhaps even senseless. And yet, for centuries it resonated in the pages of Sacred Scripture and thus also on the lips of the Hebrew people. Rejoice, be glad, exult! Many times the prophets had repeated this gentle breath of God and had shouted the silent beat of His heart for His people, His remnant. I read this in Joel: "Land, do not be afraid; be glad, rejoice, for Yahweh has done great things... (2: 21-23); in Zephaniah: "Shout for joy, daughter of Zion, Israel, shout aloud! Rejoice, exult with all your heart, daughter of Jerusalem! Yahweh has repealed your sentence" (3: 14); in Zechariah: "Sing, rejoice, daughter of Zion, for now I am coming to live among you – Yahweh declares!" (2: 14). I read and listen to it today; I say it also in my heart, in my life; a joy is announced to me, a new happiness, never before experienced. I rediscover the great things that the Lord has done for me; I experience the freedom that comes from His pardon: I am no longer sentenced but graced forever; I live the experience of the presence of the Lord next to me, in me. Yes, He has come to dwell in our midst; He is once more setting up His tent in the land of my heart, of my existence. Lord, as the psalm says, You rejoice in Your creatures (Ps 104: 31); and I too rejoice in You, give thanks to You; my joy is in You (Ps 104: 34).

- ***The Lord is with you***

These simple and enlightened words, pronounced by the angel to Mary, release an all-powerful force; I realize that these words alone would suffice to save my life, to lift me up again from whatever fall or humiliation, to bring me back when I go astray. The fact that He, my Lord, is with me, keeps me alive, gives me courage and trust to go on being. If I am, it is because He is with me. Who knows but that the experience of Isaac

told in Scripture might not be valid for me, when one day Abimelech came to Isaac with his men to tell him, "It became clear to us that Yahweh was with you" (Gen 26: 28) and then asked to become friends and form an alliance. Would that the same thing might be said of me; would that I could show that the Lord is truly with me, in my life, in my desires, in my affections, in my choices and actions; would that others might meet Him through me. Perhaps for this, it is necessary for me to absorb more of the presence of God, for me to eat and drink of Him.

Let me go to the school of Scripture, to read and re-read some passages where the voice of the Lord tells me again and again of this truth and, while He speaks, to be transformed, ever more in-dwelt. "Remain for the present in that country; I shall be with you and bless you" (Gen 26: 3). "To Joshua son of Nun, Yahweh gave this order: Be strong and stand firm, for you are to be the one to bring the Israelites into the country which I have promised them on oath, and I myself shall be with you" (Deut 31: 23). "They will fight against you but will not overcome you, because I am with you to save you and rescue you" (Jer 15: 20). "The angel of Yahweh appeared to him and said:

Yahweh is with you, valiant warrior!" (Judg 6: 12). "Yahweh appeared to him the same night and said, 'I am the God of your father Abraham. Do not be afraid, for I am with you. I shall bless you and multiply your offspring for My servant Abraham's sake'" (Gen 26: 24). "Be sure, I am with you; I shall keep you safe wherever you go, and bring you back to this country, for I shall never desert you until I have done what I have promised you" (Gen 28: 15). "Do not be afraid, for I am with you; do not be alarmed, for I am your God. I give you strength, truly I help you, truly I hold you firm with my saving right hand" (Is 41: 10)

- ***Do not be afraid***

The Bible is packed with this pronouncement full of kindness; like a river of mercy, these words are found throughout the sacred books, from Genesis to the Apocalypse. It is the Father who repeats to His children not to be afraid, because He is with them; He will not abandon them; He will not forget them; He will not leave them in the hands of their enemies. It is like a declaration of love from God to humanity, to each one of us; it is a pledge of fidelity that is relayed from hand to hand, from heart to heart, and finally comes down to us. Abraham heard these words and after him his son Isaac, then the patriarchs, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon and, with them, Jeremiah and all the prophets. No one is excluded from this embrace of salvation that the Father offers His children, even those farthest from Him, most rebellious against Him. Mary knows how to listen to these words and knows how to believe full of faith, in an attitude of absolute surrender. She listens and believes, welcomes and lives for us too. She is the strong and courageous woman who opens herself to the coming of God, letting go of all fears, incredulity and a closed spirit. She repeats these same words of God in our lives and invites us to believe like her.

- ***You enjoy God's favor***

“Lord, if I enjoy favor in your sight...”. This is the prayer that time and time again comes out of the lips and hearts of those who seek refuge in the Lord. The Scriptures tell us about such people. We come across them in our crossroads when we know not where to go, when we feel hounded by solitude or by temptation, when we experience abandonment, betrayals, heavy defeats of our own existence. When we no longer have anyone and we fail to find even ourselves, then we too, like them, find ourselves praying by repeating these same words: “Lord, if I enjoy favor in your sight...”. Who knows how often we have repeated these words, even alone and in silence. But today, here in this simple passage of the Gospel, we are forestalled, we are welcomed in anticipation; we need no longer plead, because we have already found everything that we always sought and much more. We have received freely. We are overwhelmed and now we can overflow!

- ***Nothing is impossible to God***

I have nearly come to the end of this strong journey of grace and liberation; I now come across a word that shakes me in my depths. My faith is being sifted; the Lord is testing me, scrutinizing me, testing my heart. What the angel says here in front of Mary, had already been proclaimed many times in the Old Testament; now the time has come for the fulfilment; now all the impossible things come to pass. God becomes man; the Lord becomes friend, brother; the distant is very close. And I, even I, small and poor as I am, am given to share in the immensity of this gift, this grace; I am told that in my life too the impossible becomes possible. I only have to believe, to give my consent. But this means that I have to allow myself to be shattered by the power of God; to surrender to Him, who will transform me, free me and renew me. Not even this is impossible. Yes, I can be reborn today, here and now, by the grace of the voice that has spoken to me, that has reached me even to the very depths of my heart. I seek and transcribe the passages of Scripture that repeat this truth. And as I write them, as I re-read them and say them slowly, devouring every word, and what they say takes place in me... Genesis 18: 14; Job 42: 2; Jeremiah 32: 17; Jeremiah 32: 27; Zechariah 8: 6; Matthew 19: 26; Luke 18: 27.

- ***Here I am***

Now I cannot escape, nor can I avoid the conclusion. I knew from the beginning that here, in this word, so small and yet so full, so final, that God was waiting for me. The appointment of love, of the covenant between Him and me had been fixed precisely on this word, just a gentle voice, just a kiss. I am unsettled by the richness of the presence I feel in this “Here I am!”; I need not make much effort to recall the number of times that God first pronounced and repeated these words to me. He is the ‘Here I am’ man, absolutely faithful, unforgettable. I only need to tune into Him, only find His footprints in the sand of my poverty, of my desert; I only need to welcome His infinite love that never ceases to seek me, to stay close to me, to walk with me wherever I go. The “Here I am” has already been pronounced and realized. It is already real. How many before me and how many today have experienced this! I am not alone. I still remain silent, listening before I reply...

- **“Here I am!”** (Is 65:1) God repeats; Mary replies, “Here I am, I am the servant of the Lord”; and Christ says, “I come to do Your will” (Ps 39: 8)...

A Time of Prayer: Psalm 138

Father, into Your hands I commend my life.

Yahweh, You examine me and know me, You know when I sit, when I rise,

You understand my thoughts from afar. You watch when I walk or lie down, You know every detail of my conduct.

A word is not yet on my tongue before You, Yahweh, know all about it.

You fence me in, behind and in front, You have laid Your hand upon me.

Such amazing knowledge is beyond me, a height to which I cannot attain.

Where shall I go to escape Your spirit? Where shall I flee from Your presence? If I scale the heavens, You are there,

if I lie flat in Sheol, there You are.

You created my inmost self,

knit me together in my mother's womb. For so many marvels I thank You;

a wonder am I, and all Your works are wonders. You knew me through and through,

How hard for me to grasp Your thoughts, how many, God, there are!

If I count them, they are more than the grains of sand; if I come to an end, I am still with You.

God, examine me and know my heart, test me and know my concerns.

Make sure that I am not on my way to ruin, and guide me on the road to eternity.

Closing Prayer

Father, You came down to me; You have come to me; You have touched my heart; You have spoken to me and promised joy, presence and salvation. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, who overshadows me, I, together with Mary, have been able to say to You yes, the “Here I am” of my life for you. Now there remains only the force of Your promise, of Your truth: “You are to conceive and bear Jesus.” Lord, here is the womb of my life, of my being, of all that I am and have, open before You. I place all things in You, in Your heart. Enter, come, come down again, I beg You, and make me fruitful, make me one who gives birth to Christ in this world. May the overflowing love I receive from You find its fullness and truth in touching the brothers and sisters that You place beside me. May our meeting, Father, be open, a gift to all. May Jesus be the Savior. Amen.

Saturday, March 26, 2022

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,

You yourself remind us through Your holy people that all our religious practices, even the eucharistic sacrifice, are not worth anything if we use them to bend You our way.

God, may we come to You in humility and repentance, ready to encounter You in love and to turn toward You.

Accept us as Your sons and daughters, together with Jesus Christ, your Son and our Lord forever.

Gospel Reading - Luke 18: 9-14

Jesus addressed this parable to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else. "Two people went up to the temple area to pray; one was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector. The Pharisee took up his position and spoke this prayer to himself, 'O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity — greedy, dishonest, adulterous — or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income.' But the tax collector stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.' I tell you, the latter went home justified, not the former; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Reflection

In today's Gospel, Jesus, in order to teach us to pray, tells the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Jesus has a different way of seeing things. He saw something positive in the tax collector, of whom everybody said, "He does not know how to pray!" Jesus, through prayer, lived so united to the Father that everything became an expression of prayer for Him.

The way of presenting the parable is very didactic. Luke gives a brief introduction which serves as the key for reading. Then Jesus tells the parable and at the end Jesus Himself applies the parable to life.

- Luke 18: 9: The introduction. The parable is introduced in this way: "He spoke the following parable to some people who prided themselves on being upright and despised everyone else!" This statement is Luke's. It refers to the time of Jesus, but it also refers to our own time. There are always people and groups of people who consider

themselves upright and faithful and who despise others, considering them ignorant and unfaithful.

- Luke 18: 10-13: The Parable. Two men went up to the Temple to pray: one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. According to popular opinion at that time, the tax collectors were not esteemed at all, and they could not address themselves to God because they were impure. In the parable, the Pharisee thanks God because he is better than others. His prayer is nothing other than a praise of himself, an exaltation of his good qualities and contempt for others and for the tax collector. The tax collector does not even raise his eyes, but he beats his breast and says, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" He puts himself in his own place, where he stands before God.
- Luke 18: 14: The application. If Jesus had allowed people to express their opinion and say which of the two went home justified, all would have answered, "the Pharisee!" At that time, this was the common opinion. Jesus thinks in a different way. For Him, the one who returns home justified, in a good relationship with God, is not the Pharisee, but rather the tax collector. Jesus turns all things upside down. It is certain that the religious authorities of that time were not pleased with Jesus' application of the parable.

Jesus prays. Luke informs us, especially, about Jesus' prayer life. He presents Jesus in constant prayer. The following is a list of texts of Luke's Gospel, in which Jesus appears in prayer: Lk 2: 46-50; 3: 21; 4: 1-12; 4: 16; 5: 16; 6: 12; 9: 16, 18, 28; 10: 21; 11: 1; 22: 32; 22: 7-14; 22: 40-46; 23: 34; 23: 46; 24: 30). In reading Luke's Gospel you can find other texts which speak about the prayer of Jesus. Jesus lived in contact with the Father. To do the will of the Father was the breathing of His life (Jn 5: 19). Jesus prayed very much and insisted that people and His disciples do the same, because from union with God springs truth, and the person is able to discover and find self, in all reality and humility. In Jesus prayer was intimately bound to concrete facts of life and to the decisions which He had to make. In order to be faithful to the Father's plan, He sought to remain alone with Him in order to listen to Him. Jesus prayed the psalms. He did it like any other pious Jew and He knew them by heart. Jesus even succeeded in composing His own psalm. It is the Our Father. His whole life was constant prayer: "By himself the Son can do nothing; He can do only what He sees the Father doing!" (Jn 5: 19, 30). To Him can be applied what the psalm says: "All I can do is pray!" (Ps 109: 4).

Personal Questions

- Looking into the mirror of this parable, am I like the Pharisee or like the tax collector?
- Do we "pray always" or do we turn everything we do into prayer? Which is more sincere?
- There are people who say that they do not know how to pray, but they speak with God all the time. Do you know any people like this?
- The Eastern Church has the "Jesus Prayer", which would be based on this passage, and is used to "pray always". Do I pray with the same intent: "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me, a sinner."

Concluding Prayer

Have mercy on me, O God, in Your faithful love, in Your great tenderness wipe away my offenses; wash me clean from my guilt, purify me from my sin. (Ps 51: 1-2)

Sunday, March 27, 2022

Fourth Sunday of Lent

LECTIO

Opening Prayer:

Come, Spirit Creator, reveal to us the great mystery of God the Father and of the Son united in one love. Grant that we may see the great day of God, resplendent with light: the dawn of a new world born in the blood of Christ. The prodigal son comes home, the blind sees the bright light; the pardoned good thief dissolves the ancient fear. Dying on the cross, Christ destroys death; death brings forth life, love conquers fear and sin seeks pardon. Amen.

Gospel reading - Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." So to them Jesus addressed this parable: "A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, 'Father give me the share of your estate that should come to me.' So the father divided the property between them. After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any. Coming to his senses he thought, 'How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers."' So he got up and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.' But his father ordered his servants, 'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' Then the celebration began. Now the older son had been out in the field and, on

his way back, as he neared the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean. The servant said to him, 'Your brother has returned, and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him. He said to his father in reply, 'Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf.' He said to him, 'My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.'

Prayerful silent time:

that the Word of God may enter into our hearts and enlighten our life.

MEDITATIO

A Key to the Reading:

- Dante says that Luke is the «*scriba mansuetudinis Christi*». Indeed, he is the Evangelist who loves to emphasize the mercy of the Master towards sinners and presents us with scenes of forgiveness (Lk 7: 36-50; 23: 39-43). In Luke's Gospel the mercy of God is manifested in Jesus Christ. We can say that Jesus is the incarnation of the merciful presence of God among us. "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate" (Lk 6: 36). Luke focuses on an image of God already revealed in the Old Testament (Ex 34: 6), but which, unfortunately, seems to have been ignored by the scribes and Pharisees who stressed the image of a God "who visits the sins of the fathers on the children" (Ex 34: 7). Indeed, the Pharisees and the scribes boasted about being just in the eyes of God because they did not break the law. Jesus criticizes this attitude in His teaching and by His actions. He, the "Just One" of God (1Pet 3: 18), "receives sinners and eats with them" (Lk 15: 2). Think of the parable of the publican who goes home from the temple justified in contrast with the Pharisee who praised himself before God while passing judgment on his neighbors (Lk 18: 9-14). Jesus points out to us that God's way of thinking and acting is quite different from ours. God is different, and His transcendence is revealed in the mercy that forgives sins. "My heart recoils from it, My whole being trembles at the thought. I will not give rein to my fierce anger... for I am God, not man; I am the Holy One in your midst and have no wish to destroy" (Hos 11: 8-9).
- This parable of the "prodigal son" brings out this merciful aspect of God the Father. That is why some people refer to this story as "the parable of the father who is prodigal with mercy and forgiveness." The Gospel passage is part of a series of three parables on mercy and has a preamble that leads us to contemplate "all the publicans and sinners" who approach Jesus to listen to Him (Lk 15: 1). These are reflected in the attitude of the younger son who comes to his senses and begins to think about his

state and to ponder what he lost when he left his father's house (Lk 15: 17-20). It is interesting to note the use of the verb "to listen", which recalls the scene with Mary, Martha's sister, "who sat down at the Lord's feet and *listened* to Him speaking" (Lk 10: 39); or the great crowd of people "who had come to *hear* Him and to be cured of their diseases" (Lk 6: 18). Jesus acknowledges His relatives, not by their blood relationship, but from their listening attitude: "My mother and My brothers are those who *hear* the word of God and put it into practice" (Lk 8: 21). Luke seems to place importance on this attitude of listening. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is praised for having a contemplative listening attitude, she who "*stored up all these things in her heart*" (Lk 2: 19, 51). Elizabeth proclaims her blessed because "she has believed that the promise made by the Lord would be fulfilled" (Lk 1: 45), revealed at the time of the annunciation (Lk 1: 26-38).

- The mercy of the compassionate father (Lk 15: 20), is in contrast with the severe attitude of the older son, who will not accept his brother as such and who, in the dialogue with the father, refers to him as: "this son of yours comes back after swallowing up your property – he and his women..." (Lk 15: 30). In this we can see the attitude of the scribes and Pharisees who "murmured: 'This man receives sinners and eats with them!'" They do not associate with "sinners" whom they consider unclean, but rather distance themselves from them. Jesus' attitude is different and, in their sight, it is scandalous. He likes to associate with sinners and sometimes invites Himself into their houses to eat with them (Lk 19: 1-10). The murmuring of the scribes and Pharisees prevents them from listening to the Word.
- The contrast between the two brothers is quite evocative. The younger brother recognizes his misery and fault and returns home saying: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son" (Lk 15: 18-19, 21). The older brother takes an attitude of arrogance not only towards his brother but also towards his father! His scolding is in great contrast with the tenderness of the father who comes out of the house and goes to meet him to "entreat" him to go into the house (Lk 15: 20, 28). This is an image of God the Father who invites us to conversion, to return to Him: "Come back, disloyal Israel – it is Yahweh who speaks – I shall frown on you no more, since I am merciful – it is Yahweh who speaks. I shall not keep my resentment forever. Only acknowledge your guilt: how you have apostatized from Yahweh your God, how you have flirted with strangers and have not listened to my voice – it is Yahweh who speaks. Come back disloyal children – it is Yahweh who speaks – for I alone am your Master" (Jer 3: 12-14).

A Few Questions:

to direct our meditation and practice.

- Luke focuses on an image of God already revealed in the Old Testament (Ex 34: 6), which unfortunately seems to have been ignored by the scribes and Pharisees who stressed the image of a God "who visits the sins of the fathers on the children" (Ex 34: 7). What image of God do I have?

- The Pharisees and scribes boast that they are just in the sight of God because they do not break the law. Jesus criticizes their attitude in His teaching and by His actions. Just One” of God (1Pet 3: 18), “receives sinners and eats with them” (Lk 15: 2). Do I consider myself more just than others, perhaps because I try to observe the commandments of God? What are the motives that drive me to live a “just” life? Is it the love of God or personal satisfaction?
- “All the publicans and sinners” approached Jesus to listen to Him (Lk 15: 1). Luke seems to place importance on this attitude of listening, reflection, entering into oneself, meditating, and storing up the Word in our hearts. What place do I give to listening of the Word of God in my daily life?
- The scribes and Pharisees do not associate with “sinners” whom they consider unclean, but rather distance themselves from them. Jesus’ attitude is different and, in their sight, it is scandalous. He loves to be with sinners and sometimes invites Himself to their houses to eat with them (Lk 19: 1-10). Do I judge others or do I try to pass on feelings of mercy and forgiveness, thus reflecting the tenderness of God the Father-Mother?
- “Bring the calf we have been fattening, and kill it; we are going to have a feast, a celebration, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found.” And they began to celebrate. (Lk 15: 23). In the image of the father who celebrates the return to life of his son, we recognize God the Father who has loved us so much “that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not be lost but may have eternal life” (Jn 3: 16). In the killed “fattened calf”, we can see the Christ, the Lamb of God who offers Himself as a victim of expiation for the redemption of sin. I take part in the Eucharistic banquet full of grateful feelings for this infinite love of God who gives Himself to us in His crucified and risen beloved Son.

ORATIO

Psalm 32 (31):

Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

Blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

When I declared not my sin,

my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me;

my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

I acknowledged my sin to Thee,

and I did not hide my iniquity; I said,

"I will confess my transgressions to the Lord"; then Thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin.

Thou art a hiding place for me, Thou preservest me from trouble;

Thou dost encompass me with deliverance.

Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!

Closing Prayer:

O God, who rewards the just and will not deny pardon to repentant sinners, listen to our plea: may the humble confession of our faults obtain for us Your mercy.

CONTEMPLATIO

Contemplation is knowing how to adhere with one's mind and heart to the Lord who by His Word transforms us into new beings who always do His will. "Knowing these things, you will be blessed if you do them." (Jn 13: 17)

Monday, March 28, 2022

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord our God, almighty Father,
You want us not to turn to the past
to regret it and to mourn over it
but to hope in the future,
in the new earth and the new heaven.
Give us a firm faith
in Your Son Jesus Christ,
that notwithstanding the shortcomings of our time
we may have faith in the future,
which You want us to build up
with Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord

Gospel Reading - John 4: 43-54.

At that time Jesus left Samaria for Galilee. For Jesus himself testified that a prophet has no honor in his native place. When he came into Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, since they had seen all he had done in Jerusalem at the feast; for they themselves had gone to the feast. Then he returned to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. Now there was a royal official whose son was ill in Capernaum. When he heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, who was near death. Jesus said to him, "Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will not believe." The royal official said to him, "Sir, come down before my child dies." Jesus said to him, "You may go; your son will live." The man

believed what Jesus said to him and left. While the man was on his way back, his slaves met him and told him that his boy would live. He asked them when he began to recover. They told him, "The fever left him yesterday, about one in the afternoon." The father realized that just at that time Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live," and he and his whole household came to believe. Now this was the second sign Jesus did when he came to Galilee from Judea.

Reflection

Jesus had left Galilee and set forth toward Judah in order to arrive in Jerusalem on the occasion of the festival (Jn 4: 45) and, passing through Samaria, He was returning again to Galilee (Jn 4: 3-4). The observant Jews were forbidden to pass through Samaria, and they could not even speak with the Samaritans (Jn 4: 9). When the Assyrians conquered Israel, the Jews there ended up scattered throughout the area and the Assyrians adopted the the God of Israel, Yahweh, and their practices. The Jews within Judah denied that any non-Hebrew had a right to worship Yahweh, or to worship outside of Jerusalem. Jesus did not care about these norms which prevented friendship and dialogue. He remained several days in Samaria and many people were converted (Jn 4: 40). After that, He decided to return to Galilee.

- John 4: 43-46^a: The return to Galilee. Even though Jesus knew that the people of Galilee had certain reservations about Him, He wished to return to His own home town. John refers to how badly Jesus was received in Nazareth of Galilee. Jesus himself had declared that "No prophet is honored in his own home town" (Lk 4:24). But now, given the evidence of what He had done in Jerusalem, the Galileans change their opinion and receive Him well. Jesus then returns to Cana where He had worked the first "sign" (Jn 2: 11).
- John 4: 46b-47: The petition of the court official. It is the case of a gentile. A short time before, in Samaria, Jesus had spoken with a Samaritan woman, a heretical person according to the Jews, to whom Jesus revealed His condition of Messiah (Jn 4: 26). And now, in Galilee, He receives a gentile, the official of the king, who was seeking help for his sick son. Jesus does not limit Himself to help those of His race only, nor those of His own religion. He is ecumenical and receives all.
- John 4: 48: Jesus' answer to the court official. The official wanted Jesus to go with him to his house to cure his son. Jesus answered, "Unless you see signs and portents you will not believe!" A harsh and strange answer. Why does Jesus answer in this way? What was wrong with the the official's request? What did Jesus want to accomplish through this response? Jesus wants to explain how our faith should be. The official would believe only if Jesus went with him to his house. He wanted to see Jesus curing. In general, this is the attitude that we all have. We are not aware of the deficiency of our faith. We often expect God to accomplish His work in the way we think it should be done.
- John 4: 49-50: The official repeats his petition and Jesus repeats the response. In spite of Jesus' answer, the man does not keep silence and repeats the same petition: "Sir, come down before my child dies!" Jesus continues to stand His ground. He does not

respond to the petition and does not go with the man to his house and repeats the same response, but formulated in a different way: "Go home! Your son will live!" Both in the first as well as in the second response, Jesus asks for faith, much faith. He asks that the official believe that his son has already been cured. And the true miracle takes place! Without seeing any sign, nor any portent, the man believes in Jesus' word and returns home. It could not have been easy. This is the true miracle of faith: to believe without any other guarantee, except the Word of Jesus. The ideal is to believe in the word of Jesus, even without seeing (cf. Jn 20: 29).

- John 4: 51-53: The result of faith in the word of Jesus. When the man was on the way home, his servants saw him and ran to meet him to tell him that his son had been cured, that he was alive. He asked them when the boy had begun to recover and discovered that it was exactly the time when Jesus had said, "Your son will live!" He was confirmed in his faith.
- John 4: 54: A summary presented by John, the Evangelist. John ends by saying, "This new sign, the second, Jesus performed." John prefers to speak of sign and not of miracle. The word sign connotes something which I see with my eyes, but only faith can make me discover its profound sense. Faith is like an X-Ray: it enables one to see what the naked eye cannot see.

Personal Questions

- How do you live your faith? Do you have faith in God's word or do you only believe in miracles and in perceptible experiences?
- Jesus accepts heretics and foreigners in a way that fosters conversion. How do I relate with people who are different from me? How do I foster their conversion through that relationship?
- These early cultures, like the Assyrians adopting the religion of the Hebrews over time, mixed their beliefs as they assimilated. That was probably one reason there was such resistance to outsiders among the Jews in Judah. This is true among cultures today. How should different cultures be welcomed within and into the Church, while preserving the Church's teachings, doctrine, and culture?

Concluding Prayer

Make music for Yahweh,
all you who are faithful to Him,
praise His unforgettable holiness.
His anger lasts but a moment,
His favor throughout life;
In the evening come tears,
but with dawn cries of joy. (Ps 30: 4-5)

Tuesday, March 29, 2022

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,
You have quenched our thirst for life
with the water of baptism.
Keep turning the desert of our arid lives
into a paradise of joy and peace,
that we may bear fruits
of holiness, justice, and love.
Lord, hear our prayer
through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 5: 1-16

There was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem at the Sheep Gate a pool called in Hebrew Bethesda, with five porticoes. In these lay a large number of ill, blind, lame, and crippled. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been ill for a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be well?" The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; while I am on my way, someone else gets down there before me." Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your mat, and walk." Immediately the man became well, took up his mat, and walked. Now that day was a sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who was cured, "It is the sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to carry your mat." He answered them, "The man who made me well told me, 'Take up your mat and walk.'" They asked him, "Who is the man who told you, 'Take it up and walk'?" The man who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had slipped away, since there was a crowd there. After this Jesus found him in the temple area and said to him, "Look, you are well; do not sin any more, so that nothing worse may happen to you." The man went and told the Jews that Jesus was the one who had made him well. Therefore, the Jews began to persecute Jesus because he did this on a sabbath.

Reflection

Today's Gospel describes Jesus curing the paralytic who had waited 38 years for someone to help him get to the water of the pool so as to be healed! Thirty-eight years! Faced with this total absence of solidarity, what does Jesus do? He transgresses the law of Saturday and cures the paralytic. Today, in poor countries, assistance to sick people is lacking; people experience the same lack of solidarity. They live in total abandonment,

without help or solidarity from anyone.

- John 5: 1-2: Jesus goes to Jerusalem. On the Jewish festival, Jesus goes to Jerusalem. There, close to the Temple, was a pool with five porticos or corridors. At that time, worship in the Temple required much water because of the numerous animals which were sacrificed, especially during the great festivals. This is why near the Temple there were several cisterns where rainwater was gathered. Some could contain over one thousand litres. Close by, because of the abundance of water, there was a public bathing resort, where crowds of sick people gathered waiting for help or to be healed. Archeology has shown that in the same precincts of the Temple, there was a place where the Scribes taught the Law to students. On one side, the teaching of the Law of God. On the other, the abandonment of the poor. The water purified the Temple, but it did not purify the people.
- John 5: 3-4: The situation of the sick. These sick people were attracted by the water of the bathing resort. They said that an angel would disturb the water, and the first one who would enter after the angel disturbed the water, would be cured. In other words, the sick people were attracted by a false hope – a superstition. Healing was only for one person. Just like the lottery today. Only one person gets the prize! The majority pays and wins nothing. In this situation of total abandonment, in the public baths, Jesus meets sick people.
- John 5: 5-9: Jesus cures a sick man on Saturday. Very close to the place where the observance of the Law was taught, a paralytic had been waiting for 38 years for someone who would help him to go down to the water to be cured. This fact reveals the total lack of solidarity and of acceptance of the excluded! Number 38 indicated the duration of a whole generation (Dt 2: 14). It is a whole generation which does not experience solidarity or mercy. Religion at that time was not able to reveal the welcoming and merciful face of God. In the face of this dramatic situation Jesus transgresses the law of Saturday and takes care of the paralytic, saying, “Get up, pick up your sleeping-mat and walk around!” The man picked up his mat and started to walk around among the people.
- John 5: 10-13: Discussion of the cured man with the Jews. Immediately after, some Jews arrived and criticized the man who was carrying his sleeping mat on the Sabbath. The man did not know who the one who had cured him was. He did not know Jesus. This means that Jesus, passing by that place where the poor and the sick were, saw that person; He noticed the dramatic situation in which the man found himself and cured him. He did not cure him to convert him, neither so that he would believe in God. He cured him because He wanted to help him. He wanted the man to experience love and solidarity through His help and loving acceptance.
- John 5: 14-16: The man meets Jesus again. Going to the Temple, in the midst of the crowds, Jesus meets the same man and tells him, “Now, you are well again, do not sin anymore, or something worse may happen to you.” In that age, people thought and said, “Sickness is a punishment from God. God is with you!” Once the man is cured, he has to keep from sinning again, so that nothing worse will happen to him! But in his naiveté, the man went to tell the Jews that Jesus had cured him. The Jews

began to ask Jesus why He did those things on the Sabbath. In tomorrow's Gospel we have what follows.

Personal Questions

- If I were the cured man, and told not to say anything, would I be silent or not? By proclaiming what had been done for him, despite his instruction, did he sin again?
- Have I ever had an experience similar to that of the paralytic: to remain for some time without any help? How is the situation regarding assistance to the sick in the place where you live? Do you see any signs of solidarity?
- Do I show the same compassion and help others without expecting a return and in a significant way every day?

Concluding Prayer

O Lord, both refuge and strength for us,
a help always ready in trouble;
so we shall not be afraid though the earth be in turmoil,
though mountains tumble into the depths of the sea,
and its waters roar and seethe,
and the mountains totter as it heaves. (Ps 46: 1-3)

Wednesday, March 30, 2022

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Our God and Father,
You keep seeking us out
with love as passionate as a mother's love,
even when we have abandoned you. Give us hope and courage,
especially when we feel uncertain.
Reassure us that You want us to live
in the security of Your love
and that You stay with us
through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 5: 17-30

Jesus answered the Jews: "My Father is at work until now, so I am at work." For this reason they tried all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the sabbath but he also called God his own father, making himself equal to God. Jesus answered and said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, the Son cannot do anything on his own, but only

what he sees the Father doing; for what he does, the Son will do also. For the Father loves the Son and shows him everything that he himself does, and he will show him greater works than these, so that you may be amazed. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives life, so also does the Son give life to whomever he wishes. Nor does the Father judge anyone, but he has given all judgment to the Son, so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes in the one who sent me has eternal life and will not come to condemnation, but has passed from death to life. Amen, amen, I say to you, the hour is coming and is now here when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For just as the Father has life in himself, so also he gave to the Son the possession of life in himself. And he gave him power to exercise judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not be amazed at this, because the hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and will come out, those who have done good deeds to the resurrection of life, but those who have done wicked deeds to the resurrection of condemnation. "I cannot do anything on my own; I judge as I hear, and my judgment is just, because I do not seek my own will but the will of the one who sent me."

Reflection

The Gospel of John is different from the other three. It reveals a more profound dimension, which only faith is able to perceive, in the words and gestures of Jesus. The Fathers of the Church would say that the Gospel of John is "spiritual"; it reveals what the Spirit makes one discover in the words of Jesus (cf. Jn 16: 12-13). A beautiful example of this spiritual dimension of the Gospel of John is the passage which we are going to meditate on today.

- John 5: 17-18: Jesus explains the profound meaning of the healing of the paralytic. Criticized by the Jews for having cured on the sabbath, Jesus answers, "My Father still goes on working, and I am at work too!" The Jews taught that no work could be done on the sabbath, because even God had rested and had not worked on the seventh day of creation (Ex 20: 8-11). Jesus affirms the contrary. He says that the Father has always worked **even until now**. And for this reason, Jesus also works, and even on the sabbath. He imitates His Father! For Jesus the work of creation is not finished as yet. God continues to work, unceasingly, day and night, holding up the universe and all of us. Jesus collaborates with the Father in continuing the work of creation in such a way that one day all may be able to enter into the eternal rest that has been promised. The reaction of the Jews was violent. They wanted to kill Him for two reasons: because He denied the sense of the sabbath and for saying He was equal to God.
- John 5: 19-21: It is love which allows the creative action of God to shine and be visible. These verses reveal something of the relationship between Jesus and the Father. Jesus, the Son, lives permanently attentive before the Father. What He sees the Father do, He does also. Jesus is the reflection of the Father. He is the face of the Father! This total attention of the Son to the Father makes it possible for the love of the Father to enter totally into the Son and through the Son, carry out His action in

the world. The great concern of the Father is that of overcoming death and giving life. It is a way of continuing the creative work of the Father.

- John 5: 22-23: The Father judges no one; He has entrusted all judgment to the Son. What is decisive in life is the way in which we place ourselves before the Creator, because it radically depends on Him. Now the Creator becomes present for us in Jesus. The plenitude of divinity dwells in Jesus (cf. Col 1: 19). And therefore, according to the way in which we are before Jesus, we express our position before God, the Creator. What the Father wants is that we know Him and honor Him in the revelation which He makes of Himself in Jesus.
- John 5: 24: The life of God in us through Jesus. God is life; He is the creating force. Wherever He is present, there is life. He becomes present in the Word of Jesus. The one who listens to the word of Jesus as a word that comes from God has already risen. He has already received the vivifying touch which leads Him beyond death. Jesus passed from death to life. The proof of this is in the healing of the paralytic.
- John 5: 25-29: The resurrection is already taking place. All of us are the dead who still have not opened ourselves to the voice of Jesus, which comes from the Father. But “the hour will come” and it is now, in which the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who will listen, will live. With the Word of Jesus, which comes from the Father, the new creation begins; it is already on the way. The creative word of Jesus will reach all, even those who have already died. They will hear and will live.
- John 5: 30: Jesus is the reflection of the Father. “By myself I can do nothing; I can judge only as I am told to judge, and My judgment is just, because I seek to do not My own will but the will of Him who sent Me.” This last statement is the summary of all that has been said before. This is the idea that the Johannine community had and diffused regarding Jesus.

Personal Questions

- How do you allow the creative work of the Father in your life?
- “Those who have done good deeds will go to the resurrection of life.” Do you exercise your faith in deeds, or just in talk, or in just showing off for others?

Concluding Prayer

Yahweh is tenderness and pity,
slow to anger, full of faithful love.

Yahweh is generous to all;

His tenderness embraces all His creatures. (Ps 145: 8-9)

Thursday, March 31, 2022

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord our God, we know, perhaps more in theory than in practice, that You are with us, that You are our God and we Your people. Forgive us, Lord, when we fashion our own gods made in our own image—honor, power, prestige, things to which we are attached and enslaved.

Remind us again and again that You are our loyal God, who made us in Your own indelible image and who shows us Your perfect likeness in Jesus Christ, Your Son and our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 5: 31-47

Jesus said to the Jews: "If I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is not true. But there is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that the testimony he gives on my behalf is true. You sent emissaries to John, and he testified to the truth. I do not accept human testimony, but I say this so that you may be saved. He was a burning and shining lamp, and for a while you were content to rejoice in his light. But I have testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father gave me to accomplish, these works that I perform testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me. Moreover, the Father who sent me has testified on my behalf. But you have never heard his voice nor seen his form, and you do not have his word remaining in you, because you do not believe in the one whom he has sent. You search the Scriptures, because you think you have eternal life through them; even they testify on my behalf. But you do not want to come to me to have life. "I do not accept human praise; moreover, I know that you do not have the love of God in you. I came in the name of my Father, but you do not accept me; yet if another comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe, when you accept praise from one another and do not seek the praise that comes from the only God? Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father: the one who will accuse you is Moses, in whom you have placed your hope. For if you had believed Moses, you would have believed me, because he wrote about me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?"

Reflection

John, interpreter of Jesus. John is a good interpreter of the words of Jesus. A good interpreter must have two-fold fidelity: fidelity to the words of the one who speaks, and fidelity to the language of the one who listens. In John's Gospel, the words of Jesus are not transmitted materially or literally; rather they are translated and transferred to the language of the people of the Christian communities of the first century in Asia Minor. For this reason, the reflections in the Gospel of John are not always easy to understand, because in them are mixed the words of God and the words of the Evangelist himself, who mirrors the language of faith of the communities of Asia Minor. The scholarly or

scientific study of Jesus is not sufficient for this. It is also necessary that we have the lived experience of faith in the community. Today's Gospel is a typical example of the spiritual and mystical depth of the Gospel of the Beloved Disciple.

Reciprocal enlightenment between life and faith. Here it is well to repeat what John Cassian says regarding the discovery of the full and profound sense of the psalms: "Instructed by that which we ourselves feel, let us not consider the text as something which we have only heard, but rather like something which we have experienced and which we touch with our hands; not like a strange and unheard of story, but rather like something that we bring out to light from the deepest part of our heart, as if these were sentiments which form part of our being. Let us repeat them; it is not the reading (the study) what makes us penetrate into the sense or meaning of the words, but rather our own experience which has previously been acquired in the life of every day." (Collationes X, 11). Life enlightens the text; the text enlightens life. If, at times, the text says nothing, it is not because of lack of study or because of lack of prayer, but simply because of lack of depth in one's own life.

- John 31-32: The value of the witness of Jesus. The witness of Jesus is true because He does not promote or exalt Himself. "There is another witness who speaks on My behalf," that is, the Father. And His witness is true and deserves to be believed.
- John 5: 33-36: The value of the witness of John the Baptist and of the works of Jesus. John the Baptist also gave witness to Jesus and presents Him to the people as the One sent by God who has to come to this world (cf. Jn 1: 29, 33-34; 3: 28-34). For this reason, even if the witness of John the Baptist is very important, Jesus does not depend on him. He has a witness in His favor who is greater than the witness of John, that is, the works which the Father carries out through Him (Jn 14: 10-11).
- John 5: 37-38: The Father bears witness to Jesus. Previously, Jesus had said, "Whoever is from God listens to the words of God" (Jn 8: 47). The Jews who accused Jesus did not have a mind open to God. And for this reason, they do not perceive the witness of the Father which reaches them through Jesus.
- John 5: 39-41: Scripture itself gives testimony of Jesus. The Jews say that they have faith in the Scriptures, but, in reality, they do not understand Scripture, because the Scripture speaks of Jesus (cf. Jn 5: 46; 12: 16, 41; 20: 9).
- John 5: 42-47: The Father does not judge but entrusts His judgment to the Son. The Jews say that they are faithful to the Scripture of Moses and, because of this, they condemn Jesus. In reality, Moses and the Scripture speak about Jesus and ask us to believe in Him.

Personal Questions

- Life enlightens the text; the text enlightens life. How does one use this to gain an authentic understanding of each?
- The Jews of the time were following their hardened beliefs and not open to Jesus' teaching. What is the proper balance between keeping old beliefs and accepting

new ones? How does one discern what to keep and what to adopt, and how does this apply to Church doctrine and ritual?

Concluding Prayer

Yahweh, Your kingship is a kingship forever;
Your reign lasts from age to age.
Yahweh is trustworthy in all His words,
and upright in all His deeds.
Yahweh supports all who stumble,
lifts up those who are bowed down. (Ps 145: 13-14)