

LECTIO, LITURGY AND LIVING

First Sunday of Lent

Genesis 9:8-15

Psalm 25:4-5, 6-7, 8-9

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:12-15

“This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand.”

Lent is a time of endings, of taking stock, of seeing what has been, of attending to the consequences of our failures and misdeeds. Lent is also a time of new beginnings, of fresh starts, of hopes for what will come. In the story of the new covenant established by God after the flood, we see the same pattern, acted out on a global scale: a time of endings and a time of beginnings. In St Peter’s epistle, we see the pattern on a personal scale of every baptized Christian. In the Gospel, we hear it proclaimed at the very beginning of Jesus’ own ministry.

Genesis 9:8-15

In one sense, the new covenant between God, Noah, his sons, their descendents, and every living creature with them in the ark, is a reminder of a world that is past, and that will never be. In the beginning of Genesis, God had established a first covenant with Adam and Eve and their descendents. They were to be fruitful and multiply, have dominion over the things of the earth, and they were to feed, as were all animals, only from the plants. However, the sin in the garden, and the subsequent sins of the human race, had so burdened the earth that only the death-dealing, but ultimately cleansing and life-restoring waters of the flood could restore it as a place where love of God, neighbor, and the created order could flourish. What had been is now gone, and it will never be the way it was.

Yet, even more astoundingly, while sin may have provoked and required as a remedy the waters of God’s wrath, this new covenant with God discloses even more powerfully than the original covenant God’s longsuffering, merciful kindness to all of his creatures. In this new start for the world after the flood, God is not deceived about the waywardness of the human heart. He knows how Noah and his descendents will fall into sin even as their ancestors had. Even so, God is willing to commit himself irrevocably to forbearance, to forgiveness, to restraint in the face of our human sinfulness. His wrath, the bow which before had shot the arrows of his anger, God is now willing to put aside forever, in full view. However much we, the sons and daughters of Noah might fail to live up to the generosity of God’s new covenant, God himself will abide faithful. However much we may have broken our faith with God and one another, in abuse of human dignity or of the birds and animals, wild and tame, God is always willing to respond graciously to his creation, both humans and beasts, with the opportunity of a new beginning.

Reflection Questions

What in my life do I most want to bring to an end? What patters of habits of sin do I long to see wiped away? How might I take advantage of God’s clemency and begin anew? How might I be generous to those who have grieved me? What clear sign might I show, to myself, to my fellow men and women, and to the creatures of the earth, that I have chosen to live in generosity and mercy rather than wrath and retribution?

1 Peter 3:18-22

How far does someone have to go before we believe that he is being honest and true? What do we demand that someone endure before we know that we are truly loved, truly valued?

In his epistle, St Peter points out to us the depths of God's love for us, the calamities he has endured for our sake, the disasters from which we have been rescued. Jesus has suffered, not because he deserved it or simply because bad things sometimes happen to good people, but precisely out of love for us, to lead us back to God. He not only suffered, Peter reminds us; he died. Yet, even the calamity of death could not keep us separated from him, for he "was brought to life in the Spirit." Even those who had rebelled and were long dead, those who "had once been disobedient while God patiently waited in the days of Noah during the building of the ark" do not find themselves outside the pale of God's love.

While we might think that these examples are spectacular examples of God's love having little to do with our more humble lives, Peter reminds us that our being brought to new life in baptism is no less dramatic than the rescue of Noah and his family from the flood. Even as the eight persons were specially chosen by God to be saved from what could have been a universal devastation of the earth, so also each of us in our baptism has been specifically chosen by God to be saved from sin and to share with Jesus Christ the glory of the risen life he now enjoys at "the right hand of God" in his heavenly kingdom.

There are, in other words, no "boring" Christian lives, no "ordinary" baptisms, no "plain" risings to new life in the waters of rebirth. For every Christian, renewed by "and appeal to God for a clear conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" through baptism into his death, God has graciously willed a glorious share in the wonders and mystery of the divine life itself, the indwelling life of the Holy Trinity. With a God who is willing to do so much for each and every person brought to new life in baptism, we have no need to fear whatever sinfulness of our lives has drawn us away from him.

Reflection Questions

Do I appreciate the power of the grace of baptism in my life? What would my life be like without a share in the life of the risen Christ? How might I show gratitude for having been saved specially by God through the waters of baptism? What changes in my life can reveal to myself and to others that baptism not only washes the body, but also prepares me for a share in the resurrection of Christ?

Mark 1:12-15

The temptation of Jesus in the desert is a familiar story, and we are likely to want to hear the sparring, the back and forth between the clever seductions of the Evil One and the compelling truth of the Word made flesh. Yet, Mark does not give us those sorts of details. In fact, he gives us very little indeed. We have the driving out into the desert by the Spirit, the forty days, Satan's temptation, wild beasts, and ministering angels, all in two sentences! We might think that the evangelist has a woeful lack of curiosity.

Still, there is much to be gained from this condensed account. Mark wants us to see that Jesus has done the "heavy lifting," that the hard penances and fasting, the besting of the Satan, even enduring the dangerous forces of the natural world, have been accomplished in Jesus Christ. We do not need the details precisely because they might distract us from the more important work at hand. And what is that work? Repentance.

The world is turning, Jesus proclaims. The herald's time is over, for John the Baptist has been arrested. The time for preparation is past. The time for a new world, a new beginning, is not around the corner, it is right here, right now, in the preaching of Jesus Christ. That is why we need to focus on what is most important, to set our priorities straight. That is why we pray, fast, and give to the poor. That is why we make all of our Lenten observances. The world and our lives have much that can distract us. Even details that seem pious, like the forty days Jesus spent in the desert, can lure us away from what is most important, to be ready for life in God's kingdom. It is in turning our life around, redirecting our energies, resetting our priorities, that we can enjoy the fulfillment. It is in repentance that we can receive all of the work of Jesus Christ not as happy fables, but as the very source of our life, as truly gospel, as Good News.

Reflection Questions

What in my life distracts me from attending to what I know to be important? How might I use my Lenten practices to redirect my life, to hold Jesus Christ at its center? What new possibilities might my life hold, freed from those things that draw me away from placing God at the heart of all things?

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LECTIO, LITURGY AND LIVING

Second Sunday of Lent

Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18

Psalm 116:10, 15, 16-17, 18-19

Romans 8:31b-34

Mark 9:2-10

“If God is for us, who can be against us?”

The Christian life makes many demands on us, even while it promises many glorious things as well. As we enter more deeply into Lent, the Church calls our attention to the question of trust. We turn our eyes to trusting in God’s promises even when things are at their darkest, trusting in a God who has saved us, who will save us, and who even now dwells within us and makes intercession for our every need.

Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18

In a world where men, women, and children have consented to slaying hundreds, even thousands, and themselves in the process, for the sake of what they perceive to be God’s will, is not this story of the binding of Isaac a dangerous memory, something better omitted in silence than proclaimed from our pulpits? There is, however, more to this story than meets the eye. Earlier in Genesis, Abraham had sent his son Ishmael, along with Ishmael’s mother and Abraham’s servant girl Hagar, into the wilderness with nowhere near enough food and drink to survive. Nonetheless, he did so, even against his first judgment, trusting instead in the Lord’s promise that from Ishmael would arise a great nation. Yet, he also did so in response to the jealousy of his wife Sarah who desired not the good but even the death of her rival, and indeed Abraham himself may have been less deeply burdened by the potential loss of his servant’s child than the child of his own wife, his own beloved son, Isaac.

Now, Abraham must discover what he truly believes. Did he send Ishmael off to his fate out of a real, deep trust in God’s promise that Ishmael would not die, but thrive, or did he do so for less than noble reasons? Was he acting out of faith in the promises of a faithful God, or with blind unreason and without regard for how his own acts impacted the lives of others? In commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, God was not seeking to prove something to himself. He knew Abraham’s faith, and he knew that he would deliver Isaac from harm. Rather, God wanted Abraham to know that the faith he showed in dismissing Hagar and Ishmael was real, authentic trust, and not feigned or inauthentic. God desired to free Abraham from any doubts that perhaps his faith was not genuine, that perhaps he did not act out of love for his children and those who were to benefit from God’s bountiful promises.

We, too, sometimes worry about our faith when our hand trembles in fulfilling God’s difficult commands. We, like Abraham, find ourselves wondering if our faith is genuine, if someone who obeys the Lord’s holy, but often arduous will but only by relying absolutely on God’s faithfulness and not ourselves seeing any happy outcome, can truly have real, strong faith. God, after all, has promised us glorious things in our Baptism, and promises them to us again and again in the sacraments of faith, most especially in the words of absolution when we confess our sins and all the more in the glorious promises when we receive him in Holy Communion. This Lent, can we risk being more like Abraham, who even in the face of what seemed a terrible price, did not doubt his faith in the promises God had given him and his son? Dare we trust that in following God’s

commands we will not be lost in darkness? Do we have the courage to hope that in our Christian discipleship, we will never lose without retrieval what is most dear to us?

Reflection Questions

What do I find most difficult in the Christian life? What demands does the Gospel make on me that cause me to wonder whether my faith is as strong as I would like it to be? How often do I remind myself of the promises God has made and continues to make to me as his child, redeemed in the blood of Jesus Christ and brought to life in the Spirit? How does remembering these promises help to face the difficulties of living out the Gospel?

Romans 8:31b-34

When are we most confident? Generally, we are confident when we know our own strength, when we face a task we know is within our power and ability to achieve, when we know we have done it successfully in the past. Yet, we also must admit that this is a less than satisfying kind of confidence. It is a trust which hesitates and measures, which calculates odds and weighs out costs and benefits. It is a trust that, in the end, must forego what it most wants and desires in exchange for the inevitably dissatisfying return of what can be had for certain. "A bird in the hand," it says, "is worth two in the bush," all the while wishing to see a whole flock in flight, a whole tree filled with the melodious chirping of songbirds.

Paul reminds us today of another kind of confidence, the sort we have not when relying on our own sufficiency, but when someone we know and trust "has our back." It is the confidence of a child lifted high up on his father's shoulders or guarded underneath by a mother's arms when floating in the ocean's swell. It is the confidence which knows both that what is most desired is beyond our power and yet that someone we love, who loves us even more deeply than we can ever know, has it well within his reach to get for us.

Paul knows, as we know, that the forces, both earthly and demonic, that stand opposed to our embracing the life of the Gospel are many, mighty, and dreadful. He knows, as we know, that relying on our own strength would leave us quickly seduced, overcome, beaten, and swept away. However, he also reminds us that God holds these enemies of ours to scorn and laughs at them. He has delivered his own Son into their hands and exposed him entirely to their power, even to the desolation of the Cross. They have done their worst, but their worst cannot compare to the loving power of God. Christ has overcome our enemies in rising from the dead, and even now attends to all of our needs as he "intercedes for us" at the "right hand of God." There are many, wonderful things we desire, promised us in Christ and beyond anything we could achieve on our own. Yet, God has our back. What do we have to fear?

Reflection Questions

What am I most afraid of? What forces, in the world around me or lurking in my soul, seem to me most worrisome, most likely to overcome my best efforts to follow God? When I am troubled, how quickly do I turn to Christ's help? Do I save prayer as a last resort when all looks lost, or do I turn to him at the beginning and throughout every endeavor?

Mark 9:2-10

Today we encounter one of the luminous mysteries of our faith, the Transfiguration of the Lord. In this blessed event, Jesus discloses both what will be and what already is. He shows what will be by displaying in his own body the glories of the risen body, that radiance which will spill forth from every fiber of our flesh when our bodies are reunited with our souls on the Last Day and will share with them the joy of beholding the face of God. He shows us what already is by placing before our eyes and ears an image, a sign of the Trinity in the glorified body of the Son, the voice

of the Father, and the overshadowing cloud of the Holy Spirit, who hovered over the waters at creation and overshadowed the Virgin at Christ's conception.

Yet, like spots of dirt on clear glass, this beautiful vision is marred by confusion. There is the confusion during the vision: "He hardly knew what to say, they were so terrified." There is also the confusion which followed: "So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what rising from the dead meant." In both cases, Peter and his fellow apostles came to rely on their own resources alone to tease out the sight they saw and the words they heard. They treated what they experienced as a puzzle, as a thing to be figured out and solved, rather than as a mystery, a personal reality meant to be encountered, embraced, and loved.

It is only when we look not just anywhere to make sense of life, but to see only Jesus alone, that we can enter into the mystery of the risen life in the Trinity revealed by the Transfiguration. This is the mystery into which we were reborn at Baptism and to which the whole of our Christian life is leading us, until we share that same glory which Christ manifested on the mountain and now enjoys forever at his Father's right hand. The way to this glorious destiny is not the way of puzzle or problem; it is the way of mystery, the way of a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, the way of love.

Reflection Questions

Do I treat the mysteries of God as puzzles to be solved, or an opportunity to grow in relationship with Jesus Christ? When the life of faith in Christ causes more confusion than clarity, where do I turn? How often do I recall the glory to which I am called, and which is already within me through my Baptism? How might my life change if I thought more about my own call to be transfigured in glory?

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LECTIO, LITURGY AND LIVING

Third Sunday of Lent

Exodus 20:1-17 (or 1-3, 7-8, 12-17)

Psalm 19:8, 9, 10, 11

1 Corinthians 1:22-25

John 2:13-25

“For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom”

The God who saves is also one who makes demands of us. He is a God who is concerned, even consumed, with a will for righteousness. While God’s demands of us can sometimes seem clear, other times our best efforts to follow them turn out to be wrong-headed, and true obedience can look to our best minds as foolish and reckless. This Sunday, we seek the path of obedience revealed to us in the Son and in his Cross, the path of a love, which sets us free.

Exodus 20:1-17 (or 1-3, 7-8, 12-17)

Of all the episodes of the Old Testament, of all the texts known to Christian, Jew, and unbeliever alike, perhaps the best known is the giving of the Ten Commandments to the people of Israel on Sinai through Moses and carved into tablets of stone by the very finger of God. However much we quibble or question the meaning of this or that commandment as applied to this or that hard case, the blessed words of God standing at the head of the Law come before us as models of clarity. We know what they mean and require of us; it only remains for us to do it.

But why should we obey them? For some, the Ten Commandments are fundamentally arbitrary. We do them because God commanded them. It does not matter whether God’s commands make sense or not, are easy or difficult or impossible. God rules, and we obey. For others, the Ten Commandments are redundant. After all, do we really need the heavenly Law of God almighty to know that murder, adultery, and theft are wrong, or that one’s parents deserve not disobedience and disregard, but love, care, and respect?

There is a way that both of these claims are true. God did plant in our hearts sufficient light to know the good from the evil, and as his creatures, whatever he asks of us is in accord with who we are, and to do it is indeed our delight. Here, however, God gives us a new motive for heeding his word: “I, the LORD, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery.” It is not as the one who makes demands by divine right who speaks to us, nor as the one who is the author of reason. It is as the one who has freed us from what oppresses, the one who is drawn by love to respond to our need in places of darkness that crush our bodies and smother our spirits. While he is all of these, God wants us to heed his Law as the gift of one who saves us from our enemies with a mighty arm, even in the midst of our rebellion, even when we drag our feet and long for the days of bondage in place of our new-found freedom. With a God so faithful and loving asking of us what we already know in our heart to be right, who but the most hardened of sinners could refuse? When our insistent lover who has done so much for us makes these demands in return, can we doubt that they will bring us to happiness?

Reflection Questions

Do I find God’s demands on my life liberating or stifling? When I am asked to do something, even by God, does it make a difference to me whether I understand the reasons why it must be done? How much does love allow me to do what would otherwise be difficult? What command of God’s will I seek this Lent to embrace more deeply in trust as a gift from a God who seeks not to bind but to set free?

1 Corinthians 1:22-25

According to the ancient Greek myth, the legendary musician Orpheus descended to the land of the dead in search of the shade of his beloved, Eurydice, who had died. So moved was the god of the dead by Orpheus' music that he permitted the mortal to escort his lost love back to the world of the living. There was only one condition: he could not turn back to look at her until they had passed from the underworld into the light of day. Tragically, Orpheus lost his nerve just as he could perceive the sky from the gloom of the cave, and fearing perhaps that Eurydice was not in fact behind him, turned back to glance, only to see the shade of his love return forever to dwell among the dead.

While we often demand perfect knowledge in life. We want a clear and indubitable sign or else rock-solid and indisputable reason, especially in making decisions that may change our lives forever. Still, there are some things in life, indeed the most crucial of all, where the demand for signs and wisdom will not only do us no good, but like Orpheus' glance, will take away from us the very thing for which we long. What suitor is there, after all, who could ever come to enjoy a life of happiness with his beloved if he demanded from her a compelling, logical proof of her love? Is there a wife who could ever be secure in the love of her husband if she only and always asked for signs? "Prove your love to me," is the sure and certain formula for unhappiness.

So it is with our God. God wants us to know his love for us. Indeed, it was out of love that he bore all of the torment of the Cross: the betrayal, abandonment, the sorrow of those who loved him and the tragedy of sin in those who should have done so, the cruel beatings, mockery, nails, agony and death. He did this not by a show of heavenly thunder and glory nor by unassailable reasoning. He died on the Cross, and in this he sought to melt our frozen hearts, to set us on fire with a burning love in response to a God who would endure so much for us, who would endure it even at the hands of those he came to save. Who needs signs or wisdom in face of a wondrous love like this? If love like this be folly, Lord, teach us to be fools.

Reflection Questions

What certainties do I demand in my life? What demands of proof do I make of others in my life? of myself? of God? How might I learn to the certainty that comes from love? In what ways am I willing to be seen a fool for the sake of trusting in the Gospel?

John 2:13-25

We are startled by Jesus in our Gospel today. First, we see in Jesus what we know to be there, but prefer not to notice — his righteous indignation, his holy wrath against sin. Then, we see him turn away those who sought him. Jesus holds those who "began to believe in his name when they saw the signs he was doing" to be avoided as untrustworthy. This is not the Jesus we are accustomed to see.

For their part, the merchants in the Temple were doing a good, even a holy deed. It was God himself who demanded animal sacrifice in the Temple, and without the money changers, the Roman coins used to buy the animals would have borne images, an idolatrous violation of the Covenant. The merchants were simply making possible the very worship which God himself demanded. Yet, in trying to protect the holiness of God, the merchants in the end placed a barrier around it. They came to see God's holiness as something fragile, easily spoiled, needing to be walled off, and not as a powerful, transforming presence in the world for justice and mercy. They forgot that it was they, and not God, who needed the Temple.

If the merchants were too narrow in their view of God, those seeking after signs were too broad. In their longing for open access to Jesus, for a wide inclusivity, they did not see the need to be

transformed if they would approach their Lord and Savior. Where the merchants wanted only the pure to come before God, the seekers after signs considered purity a matter of indifference.

We, as the people redeemed by the blood of Christ, whose once for all work on the Cross put an end to the bloody sacrifices of the Old Covenant, and whose Spirit has made of us a new Temple, must watch out for these same tendencies in ourselves. We might be so worried about the purity of our faith that we hide our witness and bar from ourselves any good the world has to offer, and in so doing closing our hearts from care of those whom Christ came to save. We might also be recklessly open, inviting every new idea and experience without regard for the integrity of faith, and in so doing just as readily obscuring our witness as if we had hid ourselves and our hearts away.

Reflection Questions

Do I live in fear of mixing our faith with the things of the world? Do I worry that I need to keep my faith private and sealed off from those who do not understand it? Or, do I seek after anything I hear might be spiritual? Do I permit myself to turn away from the rule of faith and turn instead to novelty? How might I engage the world with zeal for God's house, without fear and without infidelity? What practices this Lent will help me to understand my own motivations in choosing when to witness and when to listen and learn?

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LECTIO, LITURGY AND LIVING

Fourth Sunday of Lent

2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23

Psalm 137:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6

Ephesians 2:4-10

John 3:14-21

“Whoever believes in him will not be condemned”

This Sunday is *Laetare* Sunday, and in many of our churches is mournful violet will be exchanged for the rose of rejoicing. We have much cause to rejoice today, for God has graced us with many gifts. Some of those gifts may come to us as present hardship, but in the midst of it all, we know a God who is not only faithful, but also altogether committed to our salvation. It is a day to recall less our drawing near to God, our perhaps imperfect observance of Lent, as his constant drawing closer to us in Jesus Christ.

2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23

Punishment is an unhappy part of our lives. Whether we are sending a child to her room, turning a self-destructive young adult out of the house, or withdrawing the invitation to parents whose meddling causes more grief than good, we do not act simply or even especially because the wrongness of their behavior “deserves” punishment, even if in important ways this is true. Rather, we do so because those who had received our blessings would have become positively worse the longer the blessing was theirs. What is more, what was presented as a gift from us would be seen by them and by others not as a sign of love but as an approval of their disruptive and ultimately destructive life.

This is the fate of God’s people in their exile in Babylon. The sons and daughters of Judah were meant to be a sign to the world of the holiness, justice and loving-kindness of God. Without their witness, by their turning to false worship, hardness of heart, and malice to their neighbor, all the while claiming to be true to the LORD and the covenant, not only did they become morally worse, but also the whole world risked losing its only way of knowing the truth about God. It was only by depriving them of blessings that God could restore them to their senses through repentance and renewed fidelity. Only in their turning faithfully to God in their need would the world witness God not as a vengeful master, but as the God who heals as saves.

We face many adversities in life. Some may come from our own folly, but many serve a purpose we cannot ever fathom this side of Paradise. Even so, the world looks to us to see if we who proclaim a world redeemed by God, the God who led Israel from captivity and even now leads the dead to new life in the Cross of Jesus Christ, really trust in a God who saves. It is in our repentance and renewed fidelity that both we and the world will come to know the God whose rising from the dead we prepare to announce to all and rejoice without shame or regret at Easter.

Reflection Questions

When I am obliged to punish, do I do so with an eye to love, to the good of the one who is punished? When I experience punishment from others, even or perhaps especially when I cannot understand it, do I seek in it my good, or do I only find resentment? Do I give myself permission to lament even the just afflictions I endure at the hand of God?

Ephesians 2:4-10

Faith and works. Often we who profess the Catholic faith paint ourselves unhappily into a corner when it comes to our Protestant brethren. They, we insist, hold that one is saved by faith alone; we assert that we need good works, too. So, here comes Paul, splashing cold water in the face of our tepid certainties, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so no one may boast."

The fact is that we Catholics, as do all Christians, hold that the whole story of our salvation, from beginning to end, even from before we believed as were still "dead in our transgressions," is entirely "the gift of God," that is, grace. Even the good works we do in Christ are not for God surprises but were "prepared in advance, that we should live in them." None of this, however, is a reason for inaction, for spiritual laziness. Does a husband fail to please and delight in his wife because her love of him is gift, and thus unearned? Does a nun in her cloister refrain from her prayers, her care for her sisters, her ceaseless petitions in love for the needs of the world, because she knows her vocation came from God, and not her merit?

The Christian life is not an attempt to win favor with God. It is the response in love to an even deeper love, the love that set the stars in motion at the beginning of time, and has loved us even before the foundation of all created things before the dawn of time. Our Christian discipleship is a return in love to that deeper love which, knowing all of our rebellion, loved us beyond all measure in the "immeasurable riches" of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Reflection Questions

Am I comfortable in receiving gifts from others, or do I feel a need to have earned whatever good comes my way? Do I demand a return from those whom I love, or do I love them willingly and freely, without expectation of anything except that the love be received gladly? Do I try to impress God by my works? Do I take his love for granted, seeking neither to be worthy nor respond to the gift of my new life in Baptism?

John 3:14-21

Eventually, we will all face the "big questions" in our lives: where to go to school, will we marry him or not, whether that stirring is a call to priesthood, whom to appoint with medical power of attorney. We consider these to be decisions of great moment, as though what comes after depends altogether on what we say and do right here and now. Yet, looking back after we have answered the big questions, we come to see how, in many smaller ways, we had already made that decision a long time before. In all of the choices we had made, the goods we chose to pursue in our lives, the company we kept, the daily tasks of forgiveness and humility, we were formed into the person who finally faced the "big question." It turns out that our answer did not so much make our future what it will be as reveal a future that had been in the works for a very long time.

So it is in our response to the saving work of Jesus Christ. While dramatic and unexpected conversions do happen, even as do tragic and presumptuous rejections of the faith, most of us find in Christ either someone we had long been looking for even before we knew his name, or else someone we had been eluding and denying prior to any explicit invitation to the faith. Those who embrace darkness rarely do so in an extravagant act of rebellion; the rebellion is only the final flourish of a long series of negations and refusals.

The good news is that God has also been long at work in us. Even in our little refusals and rebellions, God has from before all time been working in countless ways not to "condemn the world, but that the world might be saved." As Jesus Christ was raised on the Cross, this was at one and the same time a dramatic act forever changing all that came before and would follow

after and the shining of a light to reveal all the decisions we had made and intended to make. The Cross both heals and reveals our souls. If we fear that anything be exposed, we should be free from anxiety. That fear, like numberless other promptings within us, is nothing other than God drawing us back into the light. It is the call of the one we have been making ourselves ready to meet our whole lives because he has first been making us ready for himself.

Reflection Questions

Do I not bother with the “small stuff” and concern myself only with the “big questions” of my life with God and neighbor? How have the small ways I have lived my life in a daily way either helped me to receive the Gospel or set up stumbling blocks in my life of faith? What small changes can I make in my life, in my choices, in my habits and patterns of thought, that will help direct me away from the dark parts of my life to the light of Christ?

Written by:

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LECTIO, LITURGY AND LIVING

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 51:3-4, 12-13, 14-15

Hebrews 5:7-9

John 12:20-33

“Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and died, it remains just a grain of wheat”

The Church’s observance of Lent takes a turn this Sunday. The Preface at the Mass is the Preface of the Passion, and in some churches the images, even the image of the Cross, are veiled. Our readings ask us to face infidelity, lamentation, and death. Yet, in it all, we see not despair, but the work of a faithful and loving God who had triumphed in Jesus Christ over sin and death.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

On the face of it, it would seem as though God’s promise through Jeremiah of a new covenant has not yet come to pass. After all, we were promised a covenant free from the need to teach and instruct one another about God? “No longer will they have need to teach their friends and relatives how to know the LORD.” Yet, we find ourselves repeatedly teaching one another, parents their children who hear the faith first from their lips, adults their siblings and coworkers who have glided gently or jarringly from the Gospel, and priests their curious, puzzled, or troubled parishioners. What is more, we seem to break this covenant at least as much as did the Israelites the covenant of old, even if in less dramatic ways, still in ways no less consequential, by our daily sins.

Jeremiah, however, points us to another, more excellent sort of knowing. God through his prophet tells us all will know him not by way of books or courses or stories at our mother’s knee, but through the experience of reconciliation: “All, from least to greatest, shall know me, says the LORD, for I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more.” The knowledge of the new covenant is the knowledge that comes from being loved by another, a love so powerful it can, if such a thing were possible, strike the Almighty with a holy amnesia of all our waywardness. It is in encountering love in the broken body of Jesus on the Cross, and in the comforting assurance of his priests in the words of absolution, that we have no need of instruction. When we have been forgiven, truly forgiven, by one we have deeply and repeatedly wronged, then we know what love is, to have the law written upon our hearts. To know forgiveness of sins just is what it means to know God.

Reflection Questions

What have I learned about myself when I have forgiven someone who has wronged me? What have I learned when I have experienced true forgiveness from someone I have wronged? When I go to confession, do I seek only the removal of sins? How might my confessions and penances be enriched in seeking through them to know God more fully?

Hebrews 5:7-9

We can sometimes be ashamed of our grief or anger in times of trial and when confronted with seemingly irrevocable loss. We might worry that, if only we had a little more faith, a little more trust in God, we would bear our troubles and our sorrows with a greater sense of peace and calm. But, cry and wail we do, despite our worries and hopes for it to be otherwise.

In the letter to the Hebrews, we are reminded that “loud cries and tears” are no strangers to a firm trust in God. Here we see Jesus Christ who above all knew his Father’s will and loved in full awareness of how his suffering would lead to his perfect glory and our joyous salvation. Jesus’ example points out what everyone in grief knows, if they cannot articulate. Suffering, in itself, is evil, and not to be desired or sought out. That God can draw good from suffering is undoubtedly true, preeminently so in the Cross of Christ. Even so, the suffering is not good, and in face of death and loss, prayers, supplications, cries, and tears are not only appropriate, they are altogether demanded of any loving heart. A loving heart learns obedience, then, by seeing the world as God sees it, and so mourns over suffering even as it is gladdened at the sight of holy and wholesome trust. In our prayers, we can let our tears and cries flow without fear or shame. It is in our tears of love for a suffering world that we are drawn to the perfection of the Son, “the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.”

Reflection Questions

Do I see tears and grief as a sign of a lack of faith or of the presence within me of a loving heart? How has my Lenten observance helped me to become not only filled with joyful hope, but also filled with holy tears in response both to my own sin, the suffering of the world, and the wonderful mercy of God? What might I do to be more deeply moved, as was Jesus in his Passion? How might I help others feel free to express their grief to God?

Mark 9:2-10

We are all accustomed to hyperbole, to exaggeration, to stretching a point well beyond what is literally true as a sign of the depths of our conviction and commitment. We do this especially with those deep loves that touch the innermost part of our lives — love of spouse and children, love of country and Church, love of God. But we also know that do not mean precisely what we say, that taken literally our protestations become grotesque — the lover who literally gives his right arm as a pledge of love for his beloved, the minister of State who literally defends even the most horrific acts committed by his countrymen out of patriotism, the parent who literally gives away her own soul for her child’s well being.

So, we suspect that Jesus must be speaking this way when he says that crucifixion is glory and triumph, when he says that we must die, that preserving our life is utter loss. We draw back, hoping he will reassure us that this was simply exaggeration to prove a point. However, here Jesus is quite literal and in deadly earnest. He knows his enemy, not only Satan, the “ruler of this world,” but also the coldness of our own hearts which are sluggish and unmoved by the suffering of the poor in our streets and the moral compromises of our own lives. When the dentist says a rotten tooth must be pulled, when the surgeon insists that the infected limb must be cut off, when the judge rules that the abused child must be taken from her home, they are not exaggerating to make a point. They do not delight in pain and suffering, but they know that it is only on the other side, when what is not only poisoned but also poisonous, not only endangered but also dangerous, has been cast away utterly from our lives that true life, true flourishing can begin.

This is the glory of the Son of Man lifted up on the Cross, the glory of a radical healing gone well, the glory of a real beginning after a life full of false starts, the glory of the sons of Adam and daughters of Eve drawn in loving union with a God who came to set them free.

Reflection Questions

Is there something in my life I could never imagine being without? What compromises have I made or might I make in my life not to lose it, him, or her? How might I imagine myself letting it go not by loving less, but by loving God even more? Are there lesser goods in my life from which I might begin to learn the hard but lifegiving lesson of detachment?

LECTIO, LITURGY AND LIVING

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion

Mark 11:1-10 or John 12:12-16

Isaiah 50:4-7

Psalms 22:8-9, 17-18, 19-20, 23-24

Philippians 2:6-11

Mark 14:1 – 15:47 or Mark 15:1-39

“For the Son of Man indeed goes, as it is written of him”

Here we witness the drama of our salvation, the proclamation of the Passion of Christ from his triumphal entry into Jerusalem through his Last Supper, his betrayal and trial, and finally his crucifixion, death, and burial. It is a story we know well, and so might let our attention to its power and grace wane and wander. This year, as Jesus requests of Peter, could we not keep watch? Could we not attend to the story of our salvation with fresh eyes and be ready once more to be moved to faith, hope, and love?

Mark 11:1-10 or John 12:12-16

Have you noticed how very odd your own family can seem when seen for the first time by the eyes of a stranger? That very first time you invite a friend, a roommate, a colleague, a fiancée to meet the family, all of those eccentricities we had known as normal, a part of life, are puzzles to the newcomer. It is only when they really get to know our family as persons that all of the odd behavior falls into place and makes a kind of magical sense, initially invisible but eventually clear as day.

In Mark's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, we see something very like this. The behavior of the disciples, those country folk from Galilee, untying a colt clearly not theirs, raises a few urbane Jerusalemite eyebrows. On its own it can only be naivety at best, thievery at worst. Yet, when they hear that these are the disciples of Jesus, the Master, it begins to fall into place. What was odd and possibly criminal is now seen as the fitting duties of the ministers of court preparing for the coming of the King, and the people of Jerusalem respond in due acclamation.

In John's account, it is the disciples who are puzzled. All the rejoicing, the hosannas, the hailing of their master and teacher as King of Israel, all of this is too much. The residents of Jerusalem hardly knew Jesus if at all, and here they acclaim him as David of old, and something more. For the disciples, it is only when they meet Jesus again, as if for the first time, after his rising from the dead, that they can see who had been with them all the time. It is the insight of our friend, our beloved, whom we see for the first time with his family. It is that moment of glorious insight about who he is and where he came from, that insight which puts everything we have seen and known in its proper place. It is the risen Christ, in the glory of his Father, who makes our whole Christian life clear, and in our joy we can only join in with the people of the Holy City: “Hosanna in the highest!”

Reflection Questions

How have I grown in my understanding of who Jesus is? How has my fellowship with other Christians helped me to grow in my relationship with Jesus? What did his entry into Jerusalem mean for me when I first heard the story? What does it mean to me now?

Isaiah 50:4-7

Amidst the injustices of the world, we want Jesus to speak. Is he not the eternal Word of God? Has he not a well-trained tongue, trained in modesty and truth from Mary his mother and Joseph her husband? Did he not best the Devil with well-placed words in the wilderness? By word he has forgiven, chastened, rebuked, comforted, mourned, rejoiced, and prayed. But now, when we most want him to speak, he remains silent before those who would take his life.

We might, then, expect action, but again we are disappointed. He does not act; he suffers. He will do nothing; he is merely done to. He gives his back to the scourging, cheeks to those who strike him. His beard is plucked, his face abused and spat upon.

The hour of choice is upon us. On the one hand we have unity and peace, words and deeds aplenty. In that kingdom of this world all are welcome, all find place: Jew or Gentile, activist or quietist, traditionalist or progressive, ritualist, legalist, agitator for social justice, rich or poor. All we have to do is nod in approval of one man's death, and we need sacrifice nothing else.

In the other kingdom, the kingdom of Christ, what do we find? Treason, a scattered and cowardly flock, a prince who thrice denies his king, a handful of weeping women, and a frighteningly perplexing King, a well-trained tongue with nothing to say, nailed to the Cross. Yet, this King demands everything from us: pain, mockery, rejection, and death. In return, he offers only one thing, the one thing for which all the rest is rubbish. He offers us the very life of God.

Reflection Questions

How ready am I to suffer for the sake of the Gospel? Has my Lent helped me to love those who do me wrong, to endure their confusion or rejection without malice, but without once compromising my love of Christ and his Church? In this last week before Easter, how will I prepare to say what must be said to a weary, unbelieving world about my joy in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

Philippians 2:6-11

How do we measure a thing's worth? We might see what it is made of or mark the craftsmanship that went into its design. We may also take note of the condition it is in, how well kept or damaged it is. Many things, most perhaps, are nonetheless priced far more than any of these observable features. We know a thing's value principally in the price a determined and committed buyer is willing to pay for it.

How, then, do we measure the worth of our brothers and sisters, our kith and kin of the human race? How do we know the worth of the unkempt woman, wrinkled beyond her years, begging for spare change at the street corner? How do we know the value of the confessed abuser of children sent away from our midst, out of the sight, minds, and perhaps even prayers of the faithful? How do we calculate the cost of a child who has taken up a pistol against the very people with whose children he had played only a year before?

Do we judge them by their productivity or by what they have made of their lives and their lives have made of them? Or, do we dare to assess their worth on the basis of what God was willing to set aside out of love for them? "Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself ... becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

Reflection Questions

How has the voluntary death of Jesus on the Cross changed the way I think about myself? How has it changed the way I think about those whom I love? Do the death and exaltation of Jesus affect how I treat strangers, especially those I find it hard, difficult, or even impossible to love?

Mark 14:1 – 15:47 (or Mark 15:1-39)

It is easy, even for Christians, to forget who Jesus is. To be sure, we will likely profess the Catholic faith on our lips and in our minds, that Jesus Christ is true God and true man, the eternal Son of the Father, made flesh by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary. All the same, it can be easy to calculate, to weigh, to count the cost even when it comes to our own discipleship. Do we follow the logic of our faith even where it challenges to overturn our old securities, or like the Sanhedrin do we blind ourselves to the light of Jesus for the sake of a conviction too dear to let go? Do we proclaim our fidelity to Christ even in the face of embarrassment, scorn, or rejection, or like Peter do we hedge our bets, balance our present anxieties against the love of the Almighty? Do we stand up in face of injustice against the innocent and defenseless, even to the loss of our status and possibly even our life, or like Pilate do we consider the innocence of God and God's beloved ultimately negotiable in the face of political necessity?

Jesus Christ, our Lord and our God, is not simply one good, even an excellent good, among many. He cannot be weighed or balanced against anything else, no matter how worthy it is. He alone is the source of goodness, and apart from him nothing else is good, nothing else has worth, nothing else matters. This is the insight that moved the woman to pour a year's wages of spikenard to comfort the lonely Man of Sorrows. This is the insight that gave courage to Joseph of Arimathea to demand the body of Jesus from Pilate at risk of his reputation and his life and that gave longsuffering endurance to Mary Magdalene and the Blessed Virgin to watch the whole drama of their beloved Lord and Son to its bitter end.

Even if the story had ended here, there would be no better story to be told, no better life ever lived than one for the sake of the crucified Lord laid in the tomb, and for him above all else. In our joy that the story does not end here, the joy of his rising to new life, it is easy to forget this. For the sake of him whom we hold so dear, shall we not linger a while at his Passion, the suffering, death, and burial of him whose life is worth all the more in its forsakenness than all the glories of the world, past, present and to come?

Reflection Questions

What part of the Passion of Christ do I find most difficult to bear? What parts of the story move me less than others? Why do I suppose that is? What might I do to draw closer to my Lord's Passion where I would rather move on to his rising from the dead?

Written by:

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Conclude by praying the Archdiocesan Evangelization Prayer:



Fill the hearts of all people with the fire of Your Love.
May all people come to know, love, serve Jesus as Lord!
Fill this Archdiocese with people who proclaim the
New Evangelization by lives changed by the gospel.
Fill our Cardinal, our bishops and priests, deacons and
lay ministers with the wisdom and grace; courage and self - sacrifice
to preach Jesus Christ crucified and risen from the dead!
By the humility of lives changed by Christ, infuse all who
work for the church with the grace to lead those they
serve to Christ Jesus. Fill all consecrated men and women
and all people with a new hope and decisive direction that
transforms our society by encountering Christ.
Transform our society according to the Gospel.
Come Holy Spirit! With the Father and the Son,
You are worshiped and glorified forever and ever. Amen