



Lectio Divina

English | March 2024 | ocarm.org

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¹ *Jesus in the workshop of Joseph the Carpenter, by Georges de La Tour, 1640s, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.*

Friday, March 1, 2024

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 had 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 2, 2024

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Faithful Father, You are our God of grace, mercy and forgiveness.

When mercy and pardon sound paternalistic to modern ears, make us realize, Lord, that You challenge us to face ourselves and to become new people, responsible for our destiny and for the happiness of others. Make us responsive to Your love through Christ Jesus our Lord.

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.'

Reflection

- Chapter 15 of Luke's Gospel includes the following information: The tax collectors and sinners were all crowding around to listen to Him and the Pharisees and Scribes complained saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Lk 15: 1-3). Luke presents these three parables which are bound together by the same theme: the lost sheep (Lk 15: 4-7), the lost drachma (Lk 15: 8-10), the lost son (Lk 15: 11-32). This last parable constitutes the theme of today's Gospel.
- Luke 15: 11-13: The younger son's decision. A man had two sons. The younger one asks for the part of the estate which will be his. The father divides everything between the two and each receives his part. To receive the inheritance is not any merit of ours. It is a gratuitous gift. The inheritance of the gifts of God is distributed among all human beings, whether Jewish or Gentiles, whether Christians or non-Christians. All receive something of the inheritance of the Father, but not all take care of it in the same way. The younger son leaves and goes to a distant country and squanders his money on a life of debauchery, getting away from the father. At the time of Luke, the elder one represented the communities which came from Judaism, and the younger represented the gentile communities. Today, who would be the younger and who the elder?
- Luke 15: 14-19: The disillusionment and the will to return to the father's home. The need to find some food makes the young man lose his freedom, and he becomes a farm worker and takes care of the pigs. This was the condition of life of millions of slaves in the Roman Empire at the time of Luke. The situation in which he finds himself makes the young man remember how he was in his father's home. Finally, he prepares the words which he will say to his Father: "I no longer deserve to be called your son! Treat me as one of your hired men!" The hired man executes the orders and fulfills the law of servants. The younger son wants to fulfill the law as the Pharisees and the Scribes of the time of Jesus wanted (Lk 15: 1). The missionaries of the Pharisees accused the Gentiles who were converted to the God of Abraham (Mt

23: 15). At the time of Luke, some Christians who converted from Judaism submitted themselves to the yoke of the Law (Gal 1: 6-10).

- Luke 15: 20-24: The joy of the father when he meets his younger son again. The parable says that the younger son was still a long way off from the house, but the father saw him, and ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him. The impression given by Jesus is that the Father remained all the time at the window to see if his son would appear around the corner. According to our human way of thinking and feeling, the joy of the father seems exaggerated. He does not even allow his son to finish his words. Nobody listens! The father does not want his son to be his slave. He wants him to be his son! This is the Good News which Jesus has brought to us! A new robe, new sandals, a ring on his finger, the calf, the feast! In the immense joy of the encounter, Jesus allows us to see how great the sadness of the father is because of the loss of his son. God was very sad and the people now become aware of this, seeing the immense joy of the father because of the encounter with his son! It is joy shared with all in the feast that he has prepared.
- Luke 15: 25-28b: The reaction of the older son. The older son returns from his work in the fields and finds that there is a feast in the house. He refuses to enter. He wants to know what is happening. When he is told the reason for the feast, he is very angry and does not want to go in. He thinks that he is in the right. He does not like the feast and he does not understand the why of his father's joy. This is a sign that he did not have great intimacy with the father, in spite of their having lived in the same house. In fact, if he had had this intimacy, he would have noticed the father's sadness for the loss of his younger son and would have understood his joy when the son returned. Those who live in a state of anxiety about the observance of the Law of God run the risk of forgetting God himself! The young son, even being far away from home, seemed to know the father better than the older son who lived with him. The younger one had the courage to go back home to his father, while the older one no longer wants to enter the the father's house. He does not realize that the father, without him, will lose his joy, because he, the older son, is son as much as the younger one!
- Luke 15: 28a-30: The attitude of the father and the older son's response. The Father goes out of the house and begs the older son to come inside. But the son answers, "All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any orders of yours, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends. But for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property, he and his loose women, you kill the calf we had been fattening." The older son also wants feast and joy, but only with his own friends, not with his brother and much less with his father. He does not even call his own brother "brother," but rather "this son of yours," as if he were no longer his brother. And he, the older brother, speaks about prostitutes. His malice makes him interpret his younger brother's life in this way. How many times does the older brother misinterpret the life of the younger brother. How many times do we misinterpret the life and the practices of others! The attitude of the father is the contrary! He accepts the younger son but does not want to lose the older son. Both of them form part of the family. One cannot exclude the other!
- Luke 15: 31-32: The father's final response. Like the father who does not pay attention to the arguments of the younger son, in the same way he does not pay attention to those of the older son. He says, "My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours, but it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found!" Was the older son really aware that he was always with his father and found in his presence the reason for his joy?

The father's declaration - "All I have is yours!" also includes the younger son who has returned! The older brother does not have the right to make a distinction, and if he wants to be the father's son, he has to accept the father as he is and not as he would like him to be! The parable does not say what was the older brother's final response. It is up to the older son, who we are, to give it!

- The one who experiences the gratuitous and surprising eruption of the love of God in his life becomes joyful and wishes to communicate this joy to others. The salvific action of God is a source of joy: "Rejoice with me!" (Lk 15: 6, 9). And from this experience of God's gratuitousness the sense of feast and joy emerges (Lk 15: 32). At the end of the parable, the father asks them to be happy and to celebrate, to feast. The joy is threatened by the older son, who does not want to enter the house. He thinks he has the right to joy only with his own friends and does not want to share joy with all the members of the same human family. He represents those who consider themselves just and observant, and who think that they do not need any conversion, just like the keepers of the Law in Jesus' time.

Personal Questions

- What is the image of God that I have had since my childhood? Has it changed as I changed, and why?
- With which of the two sons do I identify with: the younger one or the older one? Why?
- This parable has references to communities (Pharisees/Gentiles) as well as to individuals. Do those references apply today?

Concluding Prayer

Bless Yahweh, my soul,
from the depths of my being, His holy name; bless Yahweh, my soul,
never forget all His acts of kindness. (Ps 103: 1-2)

Sunday, March 3, 2024

Third Sunday of Lent

Opening Prayer

Spirit of truth, sent by Jesus to guide us to the whole truth, enlighten our minds so that we may understand the Scriptures. You who overshadowed Mary and made her fruitful ground where the Word of God could germinate, purify our hearts from all obstacles to the Word. Help us to learn like her to listen with good and pure hearts to the Word that God speaks to us in life and in Scripture, so that we may observe the Word and produce good fruit through our perseverance.

Gospel Reading - John 2: 13-25

- Context and Structure:

Our passage follows immediately on the first sign that Jesus gave in Cana of Galilee (2: 1-12). Some expressions and phrases are repeated in both scenes and lead us to think that the author wanted to contrast the two scenes. In Cana, a village in Galilee, during a wedding feast, a Jewish woman, the mother of Jesus, expresses her unconditional faith in Jesus and invites others to accept His word (2: 3-5). On the other hand, "the Jews," during the Paschal celebration in Jerusalem, refuse to believe in Jesus and do not accept His word. In Cana, Jesus worked His first sign (2: 11) and here the Jews ask for a sign (2: 18) but then do not accept the sign Jesus gives them (2: 20).

The development of our little story is quite simple. Verse 13 places in a framework a context of space and time that is very precise and significant: Jesus goes to Jerusalem for the Paschal feast. Verse 14 introduces the scene that provokes a strong reaction on the part of Jesus. Jesus' action is described in verse 15 and is caused by Jesus himself in verse 16. Jesus' action and words in turn provoke two reactions: first, that of the disciples, one of admiration (2: 17); and second, that of the "Jews," one of dissent and indignation (2: 18). They want an explanation from Jesus (2: 19) but they are not open to receive it (2: 20). At this point the narrator intervenes to interpret Jesus' words authentically (2: 21). "The Jews" cannot understand the real meaning of Jesus' word. However, neither can the disciples, who admire Him as a prophet full of zeal for God, grasp the meaning at this point. It is only after the fulfillment that they will believe in Jesus' word (2: 22). Finally, the narrator offers us a brief account of Jesus' reception by the crowds in Jerusalem (2: 23-25). Yet, this faith, founded only on His signs, does not impress Jesus.

- The Text:

Since the Passover of the Jews was near, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. He found in the temple area those who sold oxen, sheep, and doves, as well as the money changers seated there. He made a whip out of cords and drove them all out of the temple area, with the sheep and oxen, and spilled the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables, and to those who sold doves he said, "Take these out of here, and stop making my Father's house a marketplace." His disciples recalled the words of Scripture, Zeal for your house will consume me.

At this the Jews answered and said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and you will raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking about the temple of his body. Therefore, when he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they came to believe the Scripture and the word Jesus had spoken.

While he was in Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, many began to believe in his name when they saw the signs he was doing. But Jesus would not trust himself to them because he knew them all and did not need anyone to testify about human nature. He himself understood it well.

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

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

Some Questions

- Am I able to entrust myself completely to God's hands in an act of faith, or do I ask for signs?

- God gives me many signs of His presence in my life. Am I capable of seeing and accepting them?
- Am I satisfied with exterior worship, or do I try to offer God the worship of my obedience in my daily life?
- Who is Jesus for me? Am I aware that only in Him and through Him is it possible to meet God?

A Key to the Reading

for those who wish to go deeper into the theme.

- "The Jews"

John's Gospel is characterized by a long argument concerning the identity of Jesus. In this Christological argument, on the one hand we have Jesus and on the other "the Jews." But this argument, rather than reflecting the historical situation at the time of Jesus, reflects the situation which developed towards the 80s of the first century between the followers of Jesus and the Jews who had not accepted Him as the Son of God and Messiah. It is certain that the conflict had already begun at the time of Jesus, but the gap between the two groups, both of whom were Jews, became set when those who did not accept Jesus as Son of God and Messiah and held Him to be a blasphemer, expelled the disciples of Jesus from the synagogue, that is, from the community of Jewish believers (see Jn 9: 22; 12: 42; 16: 2).

Hence, "the Jews" that we often come across in the fourth Gospel, do not represent the Jewish people. They are literary characters in the Christological argument that evolves in this Gospel. They do not represent a race, but those who have taken the clear position of an absolute rejection of Jesus. In any reading of the Gospel, "the Jews" are all those who refuse Jesus, no matter what the race or time to which they belong.

- The Signs

The healings and other thaumaturgical acts of Jesus that the synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke) call miracles, John calls signs. As signs, they point to something that goes beyond the visible action. They reveal the mystery of Jesus. Thus, for instance, the healing of the man born blind reveals Jesus as light of the world (Jn 8: 12; 9: 1-41), the raising of Lazarus from the dead reveals Jesus as the resurrection and the life (see Jn 11: 1-45).

In our passage, "the Jews" ask for a sign in the sense of a proof that will authenticate Jesus' words and actions. But in the fourth Gospel, Jesus does not work signs as proof guaranteeing faith. A faith founded on signs is shallow and not sufficient. It is only an initial faith that may lead to true faith (see Jn 20: 30-31) but may also not do so (see Jn 6: 26).

John's Gospel asks us to go beyond signs, not to dwell on the spectacular, but to see the deepest meaning in the revelation that the signs point to.

- Jesus, New Temple

The temple in Jerusalem was the place of God's presence in the midst of the people. Yet the prophets constantly insisted that it was not sufficient to go to the temple and offer sacrifices there in order to be accepted by God (see Is 1: 10-17; Jer 7: 1-28; Am 4: 4-5; 5: 21-27). God wants obedience and a life morally straight and just. If the exterior cult does not express such a vital attitude, then it is empty (see 1 Sam 15: 22). Jesus inserts Himself in that prophetic tradition of the purification of the cult (see Zec 14: 23 and Mic 3: 1 for the action of the coming "Messiah" in this context). The disciples admire Him for

this and immediately think that for this attitude He will have to pay personally like Jeremiah (see Jer 26: 1-15) and other prophets. But in John's Gospel, Jesus' action is more than a prophetic gesture of zeal for God. It is a sign that prefigures and proclaims the great sign of the death and resurrection of Jesus. More than just a purification, that which Jesus does is to abolish the temple and the cult there celebrated, because from now on the place of the presence of God is the glorified body of Jesus (see Jn 1: 51; 4: 23).

Psalm 50

The Cult According to God's Will

The Mighty One, God the Lord, speaks and summons the earth
from the rising of the sun to its setting. Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth.

Our God comes, He does not keep silence; before Him is a devouring fire,
round about Him a mighty tempest.

He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that He may judge His people:

"Gather to Me My faithful ones,

who made a covenant with Me by sacrifice!" The heavens declare His righteousness,
for God himself is judge!

"Hear, O My people, and I will speak.

O Israel, I will testify against you. I am God, your God. I do not reprove you for your sacrifices;

your burnt offerings are continually before me. I will accept no bull from your house,
nor he-goat from your folds.

For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills.

I know all the birds of the air,

and all that moves in the field is mine. "If I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world and all that is in it is mine.

Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?

Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High; and call upon me in the day of trouble;

I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me."

But to the wicked God says,

"What right have you to recite My statutes, or take My covenant on your lips?

For you hate discipline,

and you cast My words behind you.

If you see a thief, you are a friend of his; and you keep company with adulterers. You give your mouth free rein for evil, and your tongue frames deceit.

You sit and speak against your brother; you slander your own mother's son.

These things you have done and I have been silent; you thought that I was one like yourself.

But now I rebuke you, and lay the charge before you.

Mark this, then, you who forget God, lest I tear you apart, and there be none to deliver!

He who brings thanksgiving as his sacrifice honors me; to those who go the right way

I will show the salvation of God!

Closing Prayer

Father, You have constituted Your Son, Jesus, new temple of the new and eternal covenant, built not by the hands of human beings but by the Holy Spirit. Grant that, as we welcome in faith His Word, we may dwell in him and thus adore You in spirit and in truth. Open our eyes to the needs of our brothers and sisters who are the members of the body of Christ, so that in serving them we may offer You the cult that you desire from us. We ask You this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Monday, March 4, 2024

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 Zarephath (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 angrier. 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 5, 2024

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 6, 2024

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 7, 2024

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 8, 2024

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 life worth the pain of living it.

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 - Mark 12: 28-34

One of the scribes came to Jesus and asked him, "Which is the first of all the commandments?" Jesus replied, "The first is this: Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these."

The scribe said to him, "Well said, teacher. You are right in saying, He is One and there is no other than he. And to love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." And when Jesus saw that he answered with understanding, he said to him, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." And no one dared to ask him any more questions.

Reflection

In today's Gospel (Mk 12: 28b-34), the scribes and the doctors of the Law want to know from Jesus which is the greatest commandment of all. Even today, many people want to know what is more important in religion. Some say that it is to be baptized. Others say that it is to go to church and to participate in the Sunday Mass. Others still say to love our neighbor and to struggle for a more just world! Others are concerned only with appearances and with tasks in the Church.

- Mark 12: 28: The question of the doctor of the Law. Sometime before the question of the scribe, the discussion was with the Sadducees concerning faith in the resurrection (Mk 12: 23-27). The doctor who had participated in the debate was pleased with Jesus' answer. He perceived in it His great intelligence and wished to take advantage of the occasion to ask a question to clarify something: "Which is the greatest commandment of all?" At that time, the Jews had many norms to regulate the observance of the Ten Commandments of the Law. Some said, "All these norms have the same value, because they all come from God. It is not up to us to introduce any distinction in the things of God." Others said, "Some laws are more important than others, and for this reason, they oblige more!" The doctor wants to know what Jesus thinks.
- Mark 12: 29-31: Jesus' response. Jesus responds quoting a passage from the Bible which says that the greatest among the commandments is "to love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength!" (Dt 6: 4-5). At the time of Jesus, pious Jews recited this phrase three times a day: in the morning, at noon and in the evening. It was so well known among them just as the Our Father is among us. The Pharisees would even wear Tefillin (phylacteries) which were tiny scrolls with these words written on them. And Jesus adds, quoting the Bible again, "The second one is: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19: 18). There is no

other greater commandment than these two.” A brief but very profound response! It is the summary of everything that Jesus teaches on God and His life (Mt 7: 12).

- Mark 12: 32-33: The response of the doctor of the Law. The doctor agrees with Jesus and concludes, “Well said, to love your neighbor as yourself, this is far more important than any burnt offering or sacrifice.” That is, the commandment to love is more important than the commandments which concern the worship and sacrifices of the Temple. The prophets of the Old Testament had affirmed this (Hos 6: 6; Ps 40: 6-8; Ps 51: 16-17). Today we would say that the practice of love is more important than novenas, promises, sermons and processions.
- Mark 12: 34: The summary of the Kingdom. Jesus confirms the doctor’s conclusion and says, “You are not far from the Kingdom of God!” In fact, the Kingdom of God consists in the union of two loves: love toward God and love toward neighbor. Because if God is Father/Mother, we are all brothers and sisters, and we should show this in practice, living in community. “On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets!” (Mt 22: 40). We, disciples, should keep this law in our mind, in our intelligence, in our heart, in our hands and feet, because one cannot reach God without giving oneself totally to one’s neighbor!
- Jesus had said to the doctor of the law, “You are not far from the Kingdom of God!” (Mk 12: 34). The doctor was already close, but in order to be able to enter the Kingdom he still had to go a step forward. In the Old Testament the criterion of love toward neighbor was: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” In the New Testament Jesus extends the sense of love: “This is My commandment: love one another as I have loved you! (Jn 15: 12-23). Then the criterion will be “Love your neighbor as Jesus has loved us.” This is the sure path to being able to live together in a more just and fraternal way.

Personal Questions

- What is the most important priority for you in exercising your religion?
- Are we (personally, our close community, our society) closer to the Kingdom of God nowadays or farther away from it than the doctor of the Law who was praised by Jesus?

Concluding Prayer

Among the gods there is none to compare with You, for You are great and do marvellous deeds;

You, God, and none other. (Ps 86: 8, 10)

Saturday, March 9, 2024

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 10, 2024

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Opening Prayer

Shaddai, God of the mountain, You who make of our fragile life the rock of Your dwelling place, lead our mind to strike the rock of the desert, so that water may gush to quench our thirst. May our feelings, impoverished as they are, cover us as with a mantle in the darkness of the night, and may it open our hearts to hear the echo of silence until the dawn, wrapping us with the light of the new morning, bringing us, who have kept vigil us close to the divine Master, the flavor of the holy memory.

, Gospel Text - John 3: 14-21

Jesus said to Nicodemus: "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed. But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God."

A Moment of Silence:

Let us allow the voice of the Word to resonate within us.

Meditatio

Some Questions:

- God has loved the world so much...: how many judgments and prejudices on what we think is an insensitive and far away God. Would this not be, perhaps, because we attribute to Him that which instead are our responsibilities?
- Light came into the world, but men have preferred darkness: whoever deludes himself by being only man and lives away from God cannot choose the light, because the illusion would vanish. How much darkness surrounds my days?
- Whoever does the truth comes out into the light. He is not afraid to show what he is. Man is not asked to be infallible, but simply to be man. Are we capable of living our weakness as a place of encounter and of openness to God as well as to others, who like myself, need to work faithfully in their space and in their time?

Key to the Reading:

- 3: 14-15. "As Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in Him." For the sons of Israel, who were bitten by the poisonous snakes in the desert, Moses offered the possibility of salvation by looking at the bronze serpent. If man succeeds in raising his head and looking on high, God prepares an alternative for him. He does not oblige but is there, available. The mystery of human liberty, of freedom, is the most lovable thing which God could invent! The choice of a look, of an encounter, of a new opportunity... the Son of Man in the desert of the world will be raised up on the cross as a sign of salvation for all those who will feel the need to continue living and will not allow themselves to be bitten by poisonous mistaken choices. Christ is there: cursed is he who has no faith, blessed is he who believes. We, like the Israelites in the desert, have been "bitten" by the serpent in Eden, and we need to look at the bronze serpent raised up on the staff of wood in order not to die: "Whoever believes in him has eternal life."
- 3: 16. For, in fact, God has loved the world so much, that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish, but may have eternal life. God loves us with a preferential love, a tangible love, a love which speaks... Could the Father come directly? Yes, but is the love of a Father, who gives His only Son, not greater? Every mother, if she is able to choose, prefers to die herself rather than see her son die. God has loved us so much, to the point of seeing His Son die!

- 3: 17. God sent His Son into the world not to judge the world, but so that through Him the world would be saved. A God capable of a perfect judgment sends the Son not to judge but to be a place of salvation. Truly, it is necessary to discard every thought and to place oneself before such a great love. Only the One who loves can “judge,” that is, “save.” He knows the fragility of the human heart and knows that His image, which has been darkened, has the possibility to be clear again. It is not necessary to make it anew.

The logic of life does not know death: God, who is life, cannot destroy what He himself has wanted to create. That, in some way, would be to destroy himself.

- 3: 18. No one who believes in Him will be judged; but whoever does not believe is judged already, because that person does not believe in the Name of God’s only Son. Faith is the discriminating element in every existence. Not to believe in the name of the Only Begotten Son: this is already a condemnation, because he who does not accept love excludes himself from love!
- 3: 19-20. And the judgment is this: though the light has come into the world, people have preferred darkness to the light because their deeds were evil. And indeed, everybody who does wrong hates the light and avoids it, to prevent his actions from being seen. The only judgment, by which humanity is invested, is the call to live in the light. When the sun rises, nothing can escape from its rays... and the same thing for men. When Christ is born, nobody can escape from this light which inundates everything. But men have constructed their houses to be able to flee from the light of the Love which sheds itself everywhere, houses of egotism, houses of opportunity. They have intertwined tunnels and hiding places to continue freely to carry out their deeds. And can a work deprived of light bear fruit? The light of existence has only one source: God. He who withdraws from the light dies.
- 3: 21. But whoever does the truth comes out into the light, so that what he is doing may plainly appear as done in God. Everything which is under the rays of eternal love is filled with light as it happens in nature. It seems that everything smiles when the sun shines. The things which during the day are familiar and beautiful, at night, take a form which inspires fear by the fact that they are not visible. The sun does not change its form, but it exalts it in its beauty. Whoever lives the truth of himself and accepts his fragility as an ornament of his being a man is not afraid of light because he has nothing to hide. He knows that as a creature he acts in the logic of limitation, but this does not diminish the greatness of his work because his life is one with eternal truth.

Reflection:

The garden becomes a desert for the man who draws himself away from God. And in the desert of his limitations as man he once again finds the poisonous bites of the serpent. But God does not abandon His children, and when they withdraw from Him, he follows them, ready to intervene when necessary. A serpent, the symbol of healing, is raised every time that the poison weakens the life in man, Christ the Lord. If man prefers to look down to the ground and to remain in the desert of “I do it myself,” God, just the same, offers Himself: as a serpent, as the only way in which man can recognize Him. Christ has made Himself sin, damned, in order to save His image, in order not to let human life die out. Condemnation does not belong to God; it is man’s choice. I am completely free. God’s freedom has a price of condemnation. Only people who are not intelligent enough do not profit from a gift which is given to them. It is simply foolish not to

accept what is best so as not to feel as debtors. In the sphere of love the word "debt" does not exist, because gratuitousness is the only term that can be consulted. With the word, gratuitousness light explodes: everything becomes possible, everything becomes an occasion. Works done in darkness or works done in God. It is better to go frequently to halls filled by the sunshine of a never finished apprenticeship! At least there life grows and joy fills all things with beauty.

Oratio

Psalm 35

Sin is the oracle of the wicked in the depths of his heart;
there is no fear of God before his eyes. He sees himself with too flattering an eye to detect and detest his guilt;
all he says is malicious and deceitful; he has turned his back on wisdom.
To get his way
he hatches malicious plots even in his bed; once set on his evil course
no wickedness is too much for him.
Yahweh, Your faithful love is in the heavens, Your constancy reaches to the clouds,
Your saving justice is like towering mountains, Your judgments like the mighty deep.
Yahweh, You support both man and beast; how precious, God, is Your faithful love.
So the children of Adam
take refuge in the shadow of Your wings.
They feast on the bounty of Your house,
You let them drink from Your delicious streams; in You is the source of life,
by Your light we see the light.
Maintain Your faithful love
to those who acknowledge You
and Your saving justice to the honest of heart.
Do not let the foot of the arrogant overtake me or wicked hands drive me away.
There they have fallen, the evil-doers, flung down, never to rise again.

Contemplatio

When holy fear abandons me, Oh Lord, I feel sin which speaks in my heart: these are moments of illusion, moments in which I go to look for my failures. I experience the sense of guilt without end, and all this is useless because I have not understood that it is only in doing good, that the iniquitous and misleading words of evil are extinguished. To be obstinate to evil is an attraction, almost as if this would give me more importance and honor, more value. When I become aware that what you give me and allow me to live is immense, then I perceive the great abyss of Your fidelity, and I see how Your salvation does not know any limits. Everything inundates and takes me with it, me who are in Your image and all that You have created for me and to which I have given a name. Truly, Your grace is precious. In Your house the abundance of protection is in

force, and pleasure and delight flow like water. If I look through Your eyes, Lord, then everything is light. And nothing is now difficult, because my heart, purified from temptation of being God in Your place, tells me that I will be God with You. Rivalry, competition, hostility... vanish in the face of Your offer to participate in Your divine life. God with you. You, the source of the image and I a reflection of that image! Your love as sap runs through the heart, through the depth of my humanity until I find my origin: in your Name.

Monday, March 11, 2024

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 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 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 12, 2024

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 anymore, 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 occasion of 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 rain water 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

God is 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 13, 2024

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 14, 2024

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 5: 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)

Friday, March 15, 2024

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Our God and Father,

we claim to be Your sons and daughters, who know that You love us, and that You call us to live the life of Jesus, Your Son.

Give us the courage to live this life consistently not to show off, not to reprove others, but simply because we know that You are our Father and we Your sons and daughters, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 7: 1-2, 10, 25-30

Jesus moved about within Galilee; he did not wish to travel in Judea, because the Jews were trying to kill him. But the Jewish feast of Tabernacles was near. But when his brothers had gone up to the feast, he himself also went up, not openly but as it were in secret. Some of the inhabitants of Jerusalem said, "Is he not the one they are trying to kill? And look, he is speaking openly, and they say nothing to him. Could the authorities have realized that he is the Christ? But we know where he is from. When the Christ comes, no one will know where he is from." So, Jesus cried out in the temple area as he was teaching and said, "You know me and also know where I am from. Yet I did not come on my own, but the one who sent me, whom you do not know, is true. I know

him, because I am from him, and he sent me." So, they tried to arrest him, but no one laid a hand upon him, because his hour had not yet come.

Reflection

Throughout the chapters from 1 to 12 of the Gospel of John, one discovers the progressive revelation which Jesus makes of himself to the disciples and to the people. At the same time and in the same proportion, the closing up and the opposition of the authority against Jesus increases, up to the point of deciding to condemn Him to death (Jn 11: 45-54). Chapter 7, on which we are meditating in today's Gospel, is a type of evaluation in the middle of the journey. It helps to foresee what will be the implication at the end.

- John 7: 1-2, 10: Jesus decides to go to the feast of the Tabernacles in Jerusalem. The geography of the life of Jesus in the Gospel of John is different from the geography in the other three Gospels. It is more complete. According to the other Gospels, Jesus went only once to Jerusalem, the time when He was taken and condemned to death. According to the Gospel of John He went at least two or three times to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover. This is why we know that the public life of Jesus lasted approximately three years. Today's Gospel informs us that Jesus directed himself more than once to Jerusalem, but not publicly, but hidden, because in Judah the Jews wanted to kill Him.
- In this chapter 7 as well as in the other chapters, John speaks about the "Jews" and of "you Jews," as if he and Jesus were not Jews. This way of speaking shows the situation of a tragic breaking which took place at the end of the first century between the Jews (Synagogue) and the Christians (Ecclesia). Throughout the centuries, this way of speaking in the Gospel of John contributes to anti-Semitism. Today, it is very important to keep away from this type of division so as not to foster anti-Semitism. We can never forget that Jesus is a Jew. He was born a Jew, lives as a Jew and dies as a Jew. He received all His formation from the Jewish religion and culture.
- John 7: 25-27: Doubts of the people of Jerusalem regarding Jesus. Jesus is in Jerusalem and He speaks publicly to those who want to listen to Him. People remain confused. They know that the authorities want to kill Jesus and He does not hide from them.

Would it be that the authorities have come to believe in Him and recognize that He is the Messiah? But how could Jesus be the Messiah? Everybody knows that He comes from Nazareth, but nobody knows the origin of the Messiah, from where He comes. In reality, they did not know or acknowledge where He came from, which was from God, thus fulfilling their own definition of the origin of the Messiah, even though they did not see it!

- John 7: 28-29: Clarification on the part of Jesus. Jesus speaks about His origin. "You know me and you know where I come from." But what people do not know is the vocation and the mission which Jesus received from God. He did not come on His own accord, but like any prophet He has come to obey a vocation, which is the secret of His life. "Yet, I have not come of My own accord but He who sent Me is true, and you do not know Him. But I know Him, because I have My being from Him and it was He who sent Me."
- John 7: 30: His hour had not yet come. They wanted to arrest Him, but no one laid a hand on Him, "because His hour had not yet come." In John's Gospel the one who

determines the hour and the events which will take place are not those who have the power, but it is Jesus. He is the one who determines the hour (cf. Jn 2: 4; 4: 23; 8: 20; 12: 23, 27; 13: 1; 17: 1). Even up to the time when He was nailed to the Cross, it is Jesus who determines the hour of His death (Jn 19: 29-30).

Personal Questions

- How do I live my relationship with the Jews? What have I done to study or become informed about the Jewish tradition Jesus lived?
- As Christians we are sent to proclaim the Word. Do we do it openly, or travel in secret out of fear?

Concluding Prayer

Yahweh ransoms the lives of those who serve Him, and there will be no penalty for those who take refuge in Him. (Ps 34: 24)

Saturday, March 16, 2024

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Almighty God,

when people encountered Your Son, He became a source of division:

He affected their lives one way or another. May we accept Him fully and empty ourselves to make room for Him in our everyday life, even when it hurts.

Help us, that with Him we may always seek and do Your will. We ask You this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 7: 40-53

Some in the crowd who heard these words of Jesus said, "This is truly the Prophet." Others said, "This is the Christ." But others said, "The Christ will not come from Galilee, will he? Does not Scripture say that the Christ will be of David's family and come from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?" So, a division occurred in the crowd because of him. Some of them even wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him. So, the guards went to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, "Why did you not bring him?" The guards answered, "Never before has anyone spoken like this man." So, the Pharisees answered them, "Have you also been deceived? Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, which does not know the law, is accursed." Nicodemus, one of their members who had come to him earlier, said to them, "Does our law condemn a man before it first hears him and finds out what he is doing?" They answered and said to him, "You are not from Galilee also, are you? Look and see that no prophet arises from Galilee." Then each went to his own house.

Reflection

In chapter 7, John confirms that there were diverse opinions and much confusion among the people regarding Jesus. The relatives thought something (Jn 7: 2-5) and the people thought something different (Jn 7: 12). Some said: "He is a prophet!" (Jn 7: 40). Others said: "He leads the people astray!" (Jn 7: 12). Some praised Him: "He is a good man!" (Jn 7: 12). Others criticized Him: "He has not been educated, has not studied!" (Jn 7: 15). Each one had his own arguments, taken from the Bible or from Tradition. But nobody remembered the Messiah Servant, announced by Isaiah (Is 42: 1-9; 49: 1-6; 50: 4- 9; 52: 13; 53: 12; 61: 1-2). Today, too, there is much discussion on religion, and all take their arguments from the Bible. As in the past, it happens many times that little ones are deceived by the discourses of the great ones and, sometimes, even by the discourses of those who belong to the Church. It is important to understand the full picture, and not be led astray by personal interpretations or the person sitting next to us. It is a personal responsibility to seek and learn every day, while discerning the authenticity, history, and meaning of what we see, hear, or find.

- John 7: 40-44: The confusion among the people. The reaction of the people is very diverse. Some say: He is the prophet. Others: He is the Messiah; the Christ. Others claim: He cannot be because the Messiah will come from Bethlehem and He comes from Galilee! These diverse ideas on the Messiah produce division and confrontation. There were some who wanted to take Him, to arrest Him, but they did not do it. Perhaps because they were afraid of the people (cf. Mt 14: 2). There were many sources of authority at the time, both formal and informal, from the Roman occupation, to the Elders, the priests and religious leaders, and even to the people themselves who were able to demand and obtain Jesus' execution despite there not being cause.
- John 7: 45-49: The arguments of the authority. Previously, before the reaction of the people who were in favor of Jesus, the Pharisees had sent some guards to arrest Him (Jn 7: 32). But the guards returned without Jesus. They had been greatly impressed in hearing people speak so well: "No one has ever spoken like this man!" The Pharisees reacted: "Have you also been led astray?" According to the Pharisees who said: "This rabble knows nothing about the Law" and allows itself to be deceived by Jesus. It is as if they said: "No, we the chief priests know things better and we do not allow ourselves to be led astray!" and they say that the people are "damned"! The religious authority of that time treated people with great contempt.
- John 7: 50-52: The defense of Jesus by Nicodemus. Before this stupid argument, the honesty of Nicodemus emerges, and he raises his voice to defend Jesus: "But surely our Law does not allow us to pass judgment on anyone without first giving him a hearing and discovering what He is doing?" The reaction of the others is that Nicodemus is mocking them: "Nicodemus are you also from Galilee? Look at the Bible and you will see for yourself that prophets do not arise in Galilee!" They are sure! Holding the book of the past, they defend themselves against the future which arrives and disturbs them.

Personal Questions

- Today, what are the diverse opinions that people have about Jesus? In your community, are there different opinions which cause confusion? What are they? Name them, describe them.
- There are people who accept only the new which agree with their own ideas and their past. There are others today that accept every new idea no matter how crazy. How do you discern authentic change and not be tossed about by every new idea?

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 17, 2024

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Opening Prayer

Father, hear our prayer: we implore You to send Your Spirit abundantly upon us, so that we may learn to listen to Your voice that proclaimed the glory of Your Son who gives himself for our salvation. May this attentive and concerned listening germinate in us a new hope so that we may follow wholeheartedly our Master and Redeemer, even in difficult and dark moments. Who lives and reigns forever and ever.

Gospel Reading - John 12: 20-33

The Context:

We have come to the end of the "book of signs," which is the interpretative key that John uses in his Gospel and is already foreshadowing the deadly conflict between the ruling class and Jesus. This passage is like a hinge between what John has told us up to now and ends with this appearance of the "peoples" (marked by the term "Greeks"), and that which is about to take place. John subdivides the next events into two sections. The first section is the dialogue with the disciples alone, in the context of the paschal supper (cc. 13-17); the second will be the public scene of the passion and the apparitions as the risen one (cc. 18- 21).

This passage may not be entirely real. It wishes to point out that the opening to the people began with

Jesus himself. It is not a question of going to others to convince them of something, but above all of welcoming their seeking and bringing it to maturity. This kind of maturity does not happen by itself but requires the collaboration of others and dialogue with Jesus. John does not tell us whether Jesus spoke to the Greeks. The text seems to abbreviate the story when it points to the "kind of Jesus" those who seek Him must go towards. It is the Jesus who gives His life, who bears fruit through His death. Not, therefore, a "philosopher" or "wise" Jesus, but above all one who is not attached to His own life and who gave His life and placed himself at the service of everyone else's life. Verses 27-33, which show the anguished and troubled soul of Jesus when faced with His imminent death, are also called "the Gethsemane of the fourth Gospel," in parallel with the Synoptic Gospels concerning the painful vigil of Jesus in Gethsemane. That which happens to a grain of wheat, that is, only when it breaks and dies can it free all its vitality, is also true of Jesus who in dying will show all His love by giving His life. The story of the grain of wheat is the story of Jesus and of every disciple who wishes to serve Him and have life in Him.

The Text:

Some Greeks who had come to worship at the Passover Feast came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, "Sir, we would like to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be. The Father will honor whoever serves me. "I am troubled now. Yet what should I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it and will glorify it again." The crowd there heard it and said it was thunder; but others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered and said, "This voice did not come for my sake but for yours. Now is the time of judgment on this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself." He said this indicating the kind of death he would die.

A Moment of Silent Prayer

to re-read the text with our heart and to recognize in the words and structure, the presence of the mystery of the living God.

Some Questions

to see the important points in the text and begin to assimilate them.

- Why is it that precisely Philip and Andrew were the ones approached?
- What were the "Greeks" really seeking?
- Have we sometimes been asked similar questions concerning faith, the Church, or Christian life?
- Jesus does not seem to have met the "Greeks" but He made reference to His coming "hour." Why?
- Did Jesus expect them to answer in set forms? Or through their witness?

A Deepening of the Reading

- **"Sir we wish to see Jesus"**

This is the request some "Greeks" put to Philip. It is told that they "went up to worship at the feast." They were probably those "who feared God" of whom the New Testament frequently speaks, people who were sympathizers of the Jewish religion, even though they were not Jews. They may have been of "Syro-Phoenician origin as Mark tells us (7: 26), when he speaks of the woman who sought the healing of her daughter. By their request, we may think that these "Greeks" were just curious to meet a famous and much talked of person.

But the context within which John places this request shows that they really sought Jesus with all their heart. Especially since they come immediately after it is written: "The whole world followed Him" (Jn 12: 19). Then Jesus comments on the statement with "the coming of the hour of the Son of man." The fact that they went to Philip, and Philip then went to Andrew, is due to the fact that both of them came from

Bethsaida, a city where people came from mixed background, and one needed to understand several languages. These two represent two sensibilities: Philip is more traditional (as we can see from his words when he meets Jesus (Jn 1: 45); while Andrew had already participated in John's movement and was more open to new things (cf. Jn 1: 41). This is to show that the community that opens itself to pagans, that welcomes the request of those who seek with a curious heart, is welcomed by a community that lives in a variety of sensibilities.

- **"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth..."**

Jesus' reply seems to be less interested in the Greeks who wish to see Him, and more directed to all, the disciples as well as the Greeks. He sees frontiers opening, hears the tumultuous following of the peoples, but He wishes to point out that this fame, which has attracted them, this "glory" that they would like to know more closely, is quite different from their expectations. His is a life that is about to be destroyed, a "word" that is about to be silenced, trampled to death, buried in the bowels of hatred and the earth to make it disappear. Thus, instead of seeing glory in human form, they stand before a "glory" that reveals itself through suffering and death.

This is true for them, but it is also true for every Christian community that wishes to open itself to "Greeks." Such a community must "consult" with the Lord, that is, it must keep in contact with this facet, this death for life, must give its own contemplation of the mystery and not just provide ideas. It must live in full detachment from security and human gratification, so that it may serve the Lord and, it too, receive honor from the Father. Attachment to one's life and to worldly wisdom – and in the Greek world these were important values – is the great obstacle to a true "knowledge of Jesus." To serve the name of the Lord, welcome the request of those who "seek Him," bring these seekers to Jesus, without living according to the Lord, without above all giving witness to sharing one's choice of life, one's gift of life, is useless.

- **"How is My Soul Troubled"**

This "disquiet" of Jesus is another very interesting element. It is not easy to suffer. The flesh rebels, the natural tendency is to flee from suffering. Jesus too felt this same repugnance and had the same horror before a death that promised to be painful and humiliating. His question, "And what shall I say?" reveals this trembling, this fear, this temptation to avoid such a death. John places this difficult moment before the last supper. The Synoptics, however, place it at the prayer in Gethsemane (Mk 14: 32-42; Mt 26: 36-46; Lk 22: 39-46). However, they are all agreed about this trembling and trouble, which makes Him like us, fragile and afraid.

But Jesus deals with this anguish by "entrusting himself" to the Father, reminding himself that this is His plan, that the whole of His life is directed precisely to this hour, that it is here that He reveals himself and makes sense. We know well that the theme of the hour is very important for John: see the first mention at the wedding feast of Cana (Jn 2: 4) and then frequently (Jn 4: 21; 7: 6, 8, 30; 8: 20; 11: 9; 13: 1; 17: 1). It is not so much a matter of a precise time as of a decisive circumstance towards which everything is pointing.

- **"I will draw all people to myself"**

Seen apart from the homicidal violence of one who felt threatened, the hanging on the cross becomes a real *elevation*, that is, the exhibiting of one who is salvation and blessing for all. From the violence that wanted to marginalize and eliminate, we move to the force exercised by that icon of the *elevated*. This is an "attraction" generated by curiosity, but which through love will become the source of

discipleship, of allegiance in all those who can go beyond the physical event and see in Him total free gift of self. It will no longer be seen as the ignominious death that creates distance, but the source of a mysterious attraction, a way that gives new meanings to life. A life given that generates life; a life killed that generates hope and new solidarity, new communion, new freedom.

Psalm 125

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then they said among the nations,
"The Lord has done great things for them." The Lord has done great things for us;
we are glad.
Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like the watercourses in the Negev!
May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy!
Whoever goes forth weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.

Closing Prayer

Lord our God, keep Your Son's disciples from the easy ways of popularity, of cheap glory, and lead them to the ways of the poor and scourged of the earth, so that they may recognize in their faces the face of the Master and Redeemer. Give them eyes to see possible ways of peace and solidarity; ears to hear the requests of sense and salvation of so many people who seek as by feeling; enrich their hearts with generous fidelity and a sensitivity and understanding so that they may walk along the way and be true and sincere witnesses to the glory that shines in the crucified resurrected and victorious one. Who lives and reigns gloriously with You, Father, forever and ever. Amen.

Monday, March 18, 2024

Opening Prayer

Just and merciful God,
You take pity even on sinners and You continue with them a dialogue of grace and hope. Help us too never to condemn, never to give up on people, but to be patient, understanding and forgiving, together with You and Jesus Your Son who lives with You and the Holy Spirit for ever and ever.

Gospel Reading - John 8: 1-11

Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At daybreak he appeared in the Temple again; and as all the people came to Him, He sat down and began to teach them.

The scribes and Pharisees brought a woman along who had been caught committing adultery; and making her stand there in the middle they said to Jesus, 'Master, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery, and in the Law Moses has ordered us to stone women of this kind. What do You have to say?'

They asked Him this as a test, looking for an accusation to use against Him. But Jesus bent down and started writing on the ground with His finger. As they persisted with their question, He straightened up and said, 'Let the one among you who is guiltless be the first to throw a stone at her.' Then He bent down and continued writing on the ground. When they heard this they went away one by one, beginning with the eldest, until the last one had gone and Jesus was left alone with the woman, who remained in the middle. Jesus again straightened up and said, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' 'No one, sir,' she replied. 'Neither do I condemn you,' said Jesus. 'Go away, and from this moment sin no more.'

Reflection

In today's Gospel, we will meditate on the encounter of Jesus with the woman whom was going to be stoned. Because of His preaching and His way of acting Jesus disturbs and troubles the religious authority. Because of this, they tried, by all possible means, to accuse Him and to get rid of Him. Thus, they bring before Him a woman, caught committing adultery. Under the appearance of fidelity to the Law, they use the woman in order to have an argument against Jesus. Today also, under the appearance of fidelity to the Laws of the Church, many persons are marginalized. Divorcés/divorcées, prostitutes, sick with AIDS, single mothers, homosexuals, etc. Let us see how Jesus reacts:

- John 8: 1-2: Jesus and the people. After the discussion on the origin of the Messiah, described at the end of chapter 7 (Jn 7: 37-52), "They all went home" (Jn 7: 53). Jesus did not have a house in Jerusalem. This is the reason why He went to the Mount of Olives. There was a garden there, where He usually spent the night in prayer (Jn 18: 1). The following day, before dawn, before the rising of the sun, Jesus was again in the Temple. People came very close to Him to be able to listen to Him. They sat on the ground, around Jesus and He taught them. What did Jesus teach? It must have been very beautiful because people went there before sunrise to listen to Him!
- John 8: 3-6^a: The Scribes prepare the ambush. Unexpectedly, the Scribes and Pharisees arrive, with a woman caught committing adultery. They make her stand in the middle. According to the law, the woman would have to be stoned (Lev 20: 20; Deut 22: 22, 24). They ask, "What is your opinion, what do you have to say?" It was a trap. If Jesus had said, "Apply the Law," they would have said, "He is not as good as He seems, because He has said to kill the poor woman!" If He had said, "Do not kill her," they would have said, "He is not as good as He seems, because He does not even observe the law!" Under appearances of fidelity to God, they manipulate the law using the person of the woman in order to be able to accuse Jesus.
- John 8: 6b-8: Reaction of Jesus: He writes on the ground. It seemed to be a dead alley without an exit. But Jesus is not frightened, nor does He get nervous. Instead, calmly, He bends down and begins to write on the ground with His finger. His enemies are those who get nervous. They insist and they want Jesus to give His opinion. Then Jesus rises and says, "Let the one among you who is guiltless be the first to throw a stone at her!" Then bending down again He continued to write on the ground. Jesus does not discuss the law. But He changes the objective of the judgment. Instead of

allowing them to place the law above the woman to condemn her, He asks them to examine themselves in the light of what the law demands from them. The symbolical action of writing on the ground clarifies everything. The word of the Law of God has its own consistency. A word written on the ground has no consistency. The rain and the wind carry it away. The forgiveness of God takes away sin identified and denounced by the law.

- John 8: 9-11: Jesus and the woman. The gesture and response of Jesus make His enemies go away; they are conquered. The Pharisees and the Scribes go away full of shame, one after the other, beginning with the eldest. This is the opposite of what they expected to take place. The person condemned by the law was not the woman, but rather they who believed themselves to be faithful to the law. At the end, Jesus remained alone with the woman who stood in the middle. Jesus straightened up and said, "Woman, where are they who condemned you? Has no one condemned you?!" She replied: "No one, Sir!" And Jesus concludes, "Neither do I condemn you! Go away, and from this moment sin no more!"
- Jesus does not allow anyone to use the Law of God to condemn the brother or the sister when the person who condemns is himself/herself a sinner. This episode, better than any other teaching, reveals that Jesus is the light which makes truth shine. He opens up what exists in the secret of persons, in the intimate depth of each one of us. In the light of His word, those who seemed to be the defenders of the law reveal themselves being full of sin and they themselves recognize it, and they leave, beginning by the eldest. And the woman considered to be guilty and deserving of death, remains standing up before God, absolved, redeemed and with her dignity recovered (cf. Jn 3: 19-21).

Personal Questions

- Try to put yourself in the woman's place: What were her feelings at that moment?
- What are the steps which our community can and should take to accept those who are excluded?

Concluding Prayer

Yahweh is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

In grassy meadows He lets me lie.

By tranquil streams He leads me to restore my spirit.

He guides me in paths of saving justice as befits His name. (Ps 51: 1-3)

Tuesday, March 19, 2024

Solemnity of St. Joseph, the Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary

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 Jotham who “did what Yahweh regards as right” (2 Kg 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.

Wednesday, March 20, 2024

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,

You call us to be free people.

Help us to give You always a response of freedom.

Set free by Christ's liberating word and death, may we never again shackle ourselves with self-made chains, of selfish sin and false attachments.

We ask You this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 8: 31-42

Jesus said to those Jews who believed in him, "If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been enslaved to

anyone. How can you say, 'You will become free'?" Jesus answered them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin. A slave does not remain in a household forever, but a son always remains. So if the Son frees you, then you will truly be free. I know that you are descendants of Abraham. But you are trying to kill me, because my word has no room among you. I tell you what I have seen in the Father's presence; then do what you have heard from the Father." They answered and said to him, "Our father is Abraham." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works of Abraham. But now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God; Abraham did not do this. You are doing the works of your father!" So they said to him, "We were not born of fornication. We have one Father, God." Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and am here; I did not come on my own, but he sent me."

Reflection

The reflection on chapter 8 of the Gospel of John continues today. In the form of concentric circles, John deepens the mystery of God which envelopes the person of Jesus. It seems like a repetition because he always goes back to speak of the same point. In reality, it is the same point, but every time at a more profound level. Today's Gospel treats the theme of the relationship of Jesus with Abraham, the Father of the People of God. John tries to help the communities understand how Jesus places himself within the whole history of the People of God. He helps them to perceive the difference that existed between Jesus and the Jews, and also the Jews and the others, as all of us are sons and daughters of Abraham.

- John 8: 31-32: The liberty which comes from fidelity to the word of Jesus. Jesus affirms to the Jews: "If you make My word your home you will indeed be My disciples; 32 you will come to know the truth and the truth will set you free." To be a disciple of Jesus is the same as opening oneself to God. The words of Jesus are in reality words of God. They communicate the truth, because they make things known as they are in the eyes of God and not in the eyes of the Pharisees. Later, during the Last Supper, Jesus will teach the same thing to the disciples.
- John 8: 33, 38: What is it to be a son or a daughter of Abraham? The reaction of the Jews is immediate: "We are descended from Abraham and we have never been the slaves of anyone: what do You mean: You will be set free?" Jesus repeats and confirms making a distinction between son and slave and says: "Everyone who commits sin is a slave. The slave has no permanent standing in the household, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will indeed be free." Jesus is the son and remains in the house of the Father. The slave does not live in the house of the Father. To live outside the house, outside of God means to live in sin. If they would accept the word of Jesus they could become sons and attain liberty. They would no longer be slaves. And Jesus continues: "I know that you are descended from Abraham; but you want to kill Me, because My word finds no place in you." The distinction is immediately very clear: "What I speak of is what I have seen at My Father's side, and you too put into action the lessons you have learnt from your father." Jesus denies to them the right to say that they are sons of Abraham, because their works affirm the contrary.
- John 8: 39-41^a: A son of Abraham fulfills the works of Abraham. They insist in affirming: "Our father is Abraham!" as if they wanted to present to Jesus a document of their identity. Jesus repeats: "If you are sons of Abraham do the works of Abraham! 40 Now, instead you are seeking to kill Me, because I have told you the truth heard from God; Abraham has not done this. 41 You do the works of your father." Between

the lines, He suggests that their father is Satan (Jn 8: 44). He suggests that they are sons of prostitution.

- John 8: 41b-42: If God was your Father, certainly, you would love Me, because I have My origin in God and I come from Him; I did not come of My own accord, but He sent Me." Jesus repeats the same truth using diverse words: "Whoever comes from God listens to the words of God." The origin of this affirmation is from Jeremiah who says: "Within them I shall plant My Law, writing it on their hearts. Then I shall be their God and they will be My people. There will be no further need for everyone to teach neighbor or brother, saying: 'Learn to know Yahweh!' No, they will all know Me, from the least to the greatest, Yahweh declares, since I shall forgive their guilt and never more call their sin to mind" (Jr 31: 33-34). But they will not open themselves to this new experience of God, and because of this they will not recognize Jesus as the one sent by the Father.

Personal Questions

- This passage talks about slavery in a new way to the Jews. Even today, we often think of slavery in a narrow way and not as Jesus is talking about here. In what ways are we slaves to things of the world which the Father has no need of?
- Which is my deepest experience which leads me to recognize Jesus as the one sent by God?
- There is a strong statement for us to be put together from this passage. "If God were your Father, you would love Me" and "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works of Abraham." It can then be said: "If God were your Father, you would be doing the works of God." Do we actively do the work of God every day as his children, or just when we have time or when it is convenient?

Concluding Prayer

May You be blessed, Lord, God of our ancestors, be praised and extolled forever.

Blessed be Your glorious and holy name, praised and extolled forever.

Blessed on the throne of Your kingdom, exalted above all, glorified forever. (Dn 3: 52, 54)

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord God, in Your son Jesus Christ

You have given us a new name, the name of Your Son himself. May we live up to our new destiny, to be people-for-others who serve and commit ourselves together with Jesus,

Your Son and our Lord forever.

Gospel Reading - John 8: 51-59

Jesus said to the Jews: "Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever keeps my word will never see death." So, the Jews said to him, "Now we are sure that you are possessed. Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, 'Whoever keeps my word will never taste death.' Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? Or the prophets, who died? Who do you make yourself out to be?" Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is worth nothing; but it is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, 'He is our God.' You do not know him, but I know him. And if I should say that I do not know him, I would be like you a liar. But I do know him and I keep his word. Abraham your father rejoiced to see my day; he saw it and was glad." So, the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old and you have seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, before Abraham came to be, I AM." So they picked up stones to throw at him; but Jesus hid and went out of the temple area.

Reflection

Chapter 8 seems an exhibition of works of art, where it is possible to admire and contemplate famous paintings, next to one another. Today's Gospel presents us a painting, and a dialogue, between Jesus and the Jews. There is not too much connection between one and the other painting. It is the spectator who, thanks to his/her attentive and prayerful observation, succeeds in discovering the invisible thread that binds the paintings. Thus, we penetrate into the divine mystery which envelops the person of Jesus.

- John 8: 51: Whoever keeps the word of Jesus will not see death. Jesus makes a solemn affirmation; the prophets said: Oracle of the Lord! Jesus says: "Truly, I say to you!" And the solemn affirmation is the following: "Whoever keeps My word will not see death!" This same theme appears and reappears many times in the Gospel of John. These are words of a great depth. Notice how the prophets speak on behalf of God, but Jesus speaks in the first person with authority as God!
- John 8: 52-53: Abraham and the prophets died. The reaction of the Jews is immediate: "Now we know that you are out of Your mind. Abraham died and the prophets also died. And you say: "Whoever keeps My word will never see death." Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets also died. Who are you claiming to be?" They did not understand the importance and significance of the affirmation of Jesus. It was a dialogue of the deaf.
- John 8: 54-56: I am glorified by My Father. Once again and as always Jesus hits on the same key: He is so united to the Father that everything that He says or does is His. Everything is the Father's. And He says: "The one who glorifies Me is My Father, the one whom you say, 'He is our God!' and you do not know Him. But I know Him. And if I were to say, 'I do not know Him', I should be a liar, as you yourselves are. But I do know Him, and I observe His word. Your father, Abraham, rejoiced to think that he would see My Day; he saw it and was glad." These words of Jesus must have been like a sword which wounded the self-esteem of the Jews. To tell the religious authority: "You do not know the God whom you say you know. I know Him and you do not know Him!" It is like accusing them of total ignorance exactly regarding the theme on which they think they are specialized doctors. And the final word increases the measure: "Abraham, your father, rejoiced in the hope of seeing My Day, he saw it and was glad."

- John 8: 57-59: "You are not fifty yet, and you have seen Abraham! They took everything literally, thus showing that they did not understand anything of what Jesus was saying. And Jesus makes another solemn affirmation: "In all truth I tell you: before Abraham ever was, I AM."

For those who believe in Jesus, here we reach the heart of the mystery of the story. Once again, they pick up stones to kill Jesus. But neither this time will they succeed because His hour has not as yet come. The one who determines the hour is Jesus himself.

Personal Questions

- It is a dialogue with the deaf between Jesus and the Jews. Have you sometimes had the experience of speaking with a person who thinks exactly the opposite of what you think and is not aware of it?
- How do you react when you are shown your errors? Do you consider the arguments or hold on to your thinking?

Concluding Prayer

Seek Yahweh and His strength, tirelessly seek His presence!

Remember the marvels He has done, His wonders, the judgments He has spoken. (Ps 105: 4-5)

Friday, March 22, 2024

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,

You are a loyal God, ever faithful to Your promises. Strengthen our faith, that with Jesus we may always keep trusting in You in spite of prejudices, ridicule or contradiction.

Give us the firm conviction that You are irrevocably committed to us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 10: 31-42

The Jews picked up rocks to stone Jesus. Jesus answered them, "I have shown you many good works from my Father. For which of these are you trying to stone me?" The Jews answered him, "We are not stoning you for a good work but for blasphemy. You, a man, are making yourself God." Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, 'You are gods''? If it calls them gods to whom the word of God came, and Scripture cannot be set aside, can you say that the one whom the Father has consecrated and sent into the world blasphemes because I said, 'I am the Son of God'? If I do not perform my Father's works, do not believe me; but if I perform them, even if you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may realize and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father." Then they tried again to arrest him; but he escaped from their

power. He went back across the Jordan to the place where John first baptized, and there he remained. Many came to him and said, "John performed no sign, but everything John said about this man was true." And many there began to believe in him.

Reflection

We are close to Holy Week, during which we commemorate the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus. Beginning with the fourth week of Lent, the texts of the Gospel of every day are texts taken almost exclusively from the Gospel of John, two chapters which stress the dramatic tension between the progressive revelation, on the one side, which Jesus makes of the mystery of the Father which fills Him completely, and on the other side, the progressive closing up of the Jews who always become more impenetrable to the message of Jesus. The tragic aspect of this closing up is that they claim it is in fidelity to God. They refuse Jesus in the name of God.

This way in which John presents the conflict between Jesus and the religious authority is not only something which has taken place in the far past. It is also a mirror which reflects what happens today. In the name of God, some persons transform themselves into bombs and kill other persons. In the name of God, we, members of the three religions of the God of Abraham, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, have fought among ourselves throughout history. Ecumenism is difficult and at the same time, necessary. In the name of God, many horrible things have been committed and as a world, we continue to commit them every day. Lent is an important period of time to stop and to ask ourselves: What is the image of God that I have within me?

- John 10: 31-33: The Jews want to stone Jesus. The Jews prepare stone to kill Jesus and Jesus asks: "I have shown you many good works from My Father, for which of these are you stoning me?" The answer: "We are stoning you, not for doing a good work, but for blasphemy; though you are only man, you claim to be God." They want to kill Jesus because He blasphemes. The law ordered that such persons should be stoned.
- John 10: 34-36: The Bible calls all sons of God. They want to kill Jesus because He says He is God. Jesus responds in the name of the law of God itself. "Is it not perhaps written in your Law: I said you are gods? Now, if the Law has called gods those to whom the Word of God was addressed (and Scripture cannot be set aside), to those whom the Father has consecrated and sent into the world, and you say: You blaspheme, because I have said: I am the Son of God?" Strangely, Jesus says "your law." He could have said: "our Law." Why does He speak in this way? The Jews understood the Law as applying the term "gods" to those who were the recipients of God's Word. There are three ways it could be phrased:
 - 1) the Law,
 - 2) our Law, or
 - 3) your Law.

The rabbinic interpretation precludes number 1, as it would only be applied to true Israelites. The second way would indicate a common theological understanding of the Law. His entire ministry had shown their misunderstanding of the Law, so this would not be consistent. So, in option 3, we see He not only is using the Law to explain, but also to emphasize "their" interpretations of the Law versus what He has taught. In other words it could be said: "according to the Law as you have made it out to be."

- John 10: 37-38: At least believe in the works. Jesus again speaks of the works that He does and which are the revelation of the Father. If I do not do the works of the Father, there is no need to believe in me. But if I do them, even if you do not believe in me, at least believe in the works I do, so that you will believe that the Father is in me and I am in the Father. These are the same words that He said at the Last Supper (Jn 14: 10-11).
- John 10: 39-42: Once again they want to kill Him, but He flees from their clutches. There was no sign of conversion. They continue to say that Jesus blasphemes and insist on killing Him. There is no future for Jesus. His death has been decided, but as yet His hour has not arrived. Jesus goes out and crosses the Jordan going toward the place where John had baptized. In this way He indicates the continuity of His mission with the mission of John. He helped people to become aware of how God acts in history. The people recognize in Jesus the one whom John had announced.

Personal Questions

- The Jews condemn Jesus in the name of God, in the name of the image that they have of God. Have I ever condemned someone in the name of God?
- Do you reveal the presence of Jesus within you by the works that you do?

Concluding Prayer

Yahweh is my rock and my fortress, my deliverer is my God.

I take refuge in Him, my rock, my shield, my saving strength, my stronghold,
my place of refuge. (Ps 18: 2)

Saturday, March 23, 2024

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord God, creator and Father of all,

Your sons and daughters are still scattered and divided: Christians and non-Christians, various Churches and sects claiming exclusive rights on Your Son, and each of them full of factions.

Make us dream again the dream which You alone can make possible: that we can all be one if we believe and follow Him who died to unite all that is scattered, Jesus Christ, our Lord forever.

Gospel Reading – John 11: 45-56

Many of the Jews who had come to Mary and seen what Jesus had done began to believe in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees convened the Sanhedrin and said, "What are we going to do? This man is performing many signs. If we leave him alone, all will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our land and our nation." But

one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing, nor do you consider that it is better for you that one man should die instead of the people, so that the whole nation may not perish." He did not say this on his own, but since he was high priest for that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not only for the nation, but also to gather into one the dispersed children of God. So from that day on they planned to kill him. So Jesus no longer walked about in public among the Jews, but he left for the region near the desert, to a town called Ephraim, and there he remained with his disciples. Now the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before Passover to purify themselves. They looked for Jesus and said to one another as they were in the temple area, "What do you think? That he will not come to the feast?"

Reflection

The Gospel today gives the last part of the long episode of the resurrection of Lazarus in Bethany, in the house of Martha and Mary (Jn 11: 1-56). The resurrection of Lazarus is the seventh sign (miracle) of Jesus in John's Gospel and is also the high and decisive point of the revelation which He made of God and of himself.

The small community of Bethany, where Jesus liked to go, mirrors the situation and the lifestyle of the small community of the Beloved Disciple at the end of the first century in Asia Minor. Bethany means "The House of the Poor." They were poor communities and a poor people. Martha means "Lady" (coordinator): a woman coordinated the community. Lazarus means "God helps." The community which was poor expected everything from God. Mary means "loved by Yahweh: she was the beloved disciple, image of the community. The episode of the resurrection of Lazarus communicated this certainty: Jesus is the source of life for the community of the poor. Jesus is the source of life for all those who believe in Him.

- John 11: 45-46: The repercussion of the Seventh Sign among the people. After the resurrection of Lazarus (Jn 11: 1-44), there is the description of the repercussion of this sign among the people. The people were divided; "many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what He did, believed in Him." But some of them went to the Pharisees to tell them what Jesus had done.

The latter denounced Him. In order to be able to understand this reaction of one part of the population it is necessary to become aware that half of the population of Jerusalem depended completely on the Temple so as to be able to live and to survive. Because of this, it would have been difficult for them to support an unknown prophet from Galilee who criticized the Temple and the authority. This also explains why some even were ready to inform the authority.

- John 11: 47-53: The repercussion of the Seventh Sign among those in authority. The news of the resurrection of Lazarus increased the popularity of Jesus. This is why the religious leaders convoked a council meeting, the Sanhedrin, the maximum authority, to discern getting rid of Him; because "this man works many signs. If we let Him go on this way everybody will believe in Him and the Romans will come and suppress the Holy Place and our nation." They were afraid of the Romans, because in the past it had been shown many times, by the Roman invasions in the year 64 before Christ until the time of Jesus, that the Romans repressed with great violence any attempt of popular rebellion. (Cf. Ac 5: 35-37). In the case of Jesus, the Roman reaction could have lead to the loss of everything, even of the Temple and of the privileged position of the priests. Because of this, Caiaphas, the High Priest, decides: "It is better that one man should die for the people, rather than that the whole nation should perish." And the Evangelist comments: "He did not speak this in His own

person, but as high priest of that year, he was prophesying that Jesus was to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather together into one the scattered children of God." Thus, beginning at that moment, because the chief priests were concerned Jesus' authority was growing, and being motivated by the fear of the Romans, they decided to kill Jesus.

- John 11: 54-56: The repercussion of the seventh sign in the life of Jesus. The final result is that Jesus had to live apart. "So Jesus no longer went about openly among the Jews; He left the district and went to a region near the desert, to a city called Ephraim and stayed there with His disciples." The Jewish Passover was drawing near. At this time of the year, the population of Jerusalem tripled because of the great number of pilgrims. The conversation was all around Jesus: "What do you think, will He come to the festival or not?" In the same way, at the time that the Gospel was written at the end of the first century, the time of the persecution of the Emperor Domitian (from 81 to 96), the Christian communities who lived in the service of others were obliged to live clandestinely.

A key to understand the seventh sign of the resurrection of Lazarus. Lazarus was sick. His sisters Martha and Mary sent someone to call Jesus: "The one whom you love is sick!" (Jn 11: 3, 5). Jesus responds to the request and explains to the disciples: "This sickness will not end in death, but it is for God's glory so that through it the Son of God may be glorified" (Jn 11: 4). In John's Gospel, the glorification of Jesus comes through His death (Jn 12: 23; 17: 1). One of the causes of His condemnation to death was the resurrection of Lazarus (Jn 11: 50; 12: 10). Many Jews were in the house of Martha and Mary to console them because of the loss of their brother. The Jews, representatives of the Ancient Covenant, only know how to console. They do not give new life. Jesus is the one who brings new life! Thus, on one side, the threat of death against Jesus! On the other, Jesus who overcomes death! In this context of conflict between life and death the seventh sign of the resurrection of Lazarus takes place. Martha says that she believes in the resurrection. The Pharisees and the majority of the people say that they believe in the Resurrection (Ac 23: 6-10; Mk 12: 18). They believed, but they did not reveal it. It was only faith in the resurrection at the end of time and not in the present resurrection in history, here and now. This ancient faith did not renew life. It is not enough to believe in the resurrection which will come at the end of time, but it is necessary to believe in the Resurrection already present here and now in the person of Jesus and in those who believe in Jesus. On these people, death no longer has any power, because Jesus "is the resurrection and the life." Even without seeing the concrete sign of the resurrection of Lazarus, Martha confesses her faith: "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of the living God who was to come into the world" (Jn 11: 27).

Jesus orders that the stone be removed. Martha reacts: "Lord, by now He will smell! This is the fourth day since He died!" (Jn 11: 39). Once again Jesus presents the challenge asking to believe in the resurrection, here and now, as a sign of the glory of God: "Have I not told you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?" (Jn 11: 40). They removed the stone. Before the open tomb and before the unbelief of the persons, Jesus addresses himself to the Father. In His prayer, first of all, He gives thanks: "Father, I thank you for hearing My prayer. I myself know that you hear me always!" (Jn 11: 41- 42). Jesus knows the Father and trusts Him. But now He asks for a sign because of the multitude, which is around Him, so that the people can believe that He, Jesus, has been sent by the Father. Then He cried out in a loud voice: "Lazarus, come out!" Lazarus came out (Jn 11: 43-44). This is the triumph of life over death, of faith over unbelief. A farmer once commented: "It is up to us to remove the

stone. And it is up to God to resurrect the community. There are people who do not know how to remove the stone, and because of this their community has no life!”

Personal Questions

- What does it mean for me to believe in the resurrection?
- Have I ever “sacrificed” someone rather than protect them in order to preserve the status quo?

Concluding Prayer

For You are my hope, Lord, my trust, Yahweh, since my youth. On You I have relied since my birth, since my mother's womb You have been my portion, the constant theme of my praise. (Ps 71: 5-6)

Sunday, March 24, 2024

Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord

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 from 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.

The Passion and Death of Jesus - Mark 14: 1 - 15: 47

A Key to the Reading:

Generally, when we read the story of the passion and death, we look at Jesus and the suffering He had to endure. But it is worthwhile, at least once, to also look at the disciples and see how they reacted to the cross and how the cross impacted on their lives, for the cross is a measure for comparison!

Mark writes for the communities of the 70's. Many of these communities, whether in Italy or Syria, were going through their own passion. They were faced with the cross in many ways. They had been persecuted at the time of Nero in the 60's and many had died, devoured by wild beasts. Others had betrayed, denied or abandoned their faith in Jesus, like Peter, Judas and other disciples. Others asked themselves: “Can I bear persecution?” Others were tired after persevering through many trials without any results. Among those who had abandoned their faith, some asked themselves whether it was possible to rejoin the community. They wanted to start their journey again, but

did not know if it was possible to rejoin. A cut branch has no roots! They all needed new and strong reasons to restart their journey. They were in need of a renewed experience of the love of God, one that surpassed their human errors. Where could they find this? For them, as for us, the answer is in chapters 14 to 16 of Mark's Gospel, which describe the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, the time of the greatest defeat of the disciples and, in a hidden way, their greatest hope. Let us look into the mirror of these chapters to see how the disciples reacted to the Cross and how Jesus reacts to the infidelity and weaknesses of the disciples. Let us try to discover how Mark encourages the faith of the community and how he describes the one who is truly a disciple of Jesus.

Looking into the Mirror of the Passion to Know How to be a Faithful Disciple

- *** Mark 14: 1-9: Introduction to the Passion and Death of Jesus**

The Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were to take place in two days' time. So the chief priests and the scribes were seeking a way to arrest him by treachery and put him to death. They said, "Not during the festival, for fear that there may be a riot among the people." When he was in Bethany reclining at table in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of perfumed oil, costly genuine spikenard. She broke the alabaster jar and poured it on his head. There were some who were indignant. "Why has there been this waste of perfumed oil? It could have been sold for more than three hundred days' wages and the money given to the poor." They were infuriated with her. Jesus said, "Let her alone. Why do you make trouble for her?"

She has done a good thing for me. The poor you will always have with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them, but you will not always have me. She has done what she could. She has anticipated anointing my body for burial. Amen, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed to the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."

- **Mark 14: 1-2: The Conspiracy against Jesus.**

At the end of His missionary activity, Jesus goes to Jerusalem and is expected by those who hold power: the Priests, Elders, Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians and Romans. They control the situation.... they will not allow Jesus, a carpenter from the interior of Galilee, to provoke disorder. They had already decided to put Jesus to death (Mk 11: 18; 12: 12). Jesus was a condemned man. Now, what He himself had foretold to His disciples will happen: "The Son of Man is destined to be put to death." (cf. Mk 8: 31; 9: 31; 10: 33). This is the background to the story of the passion that follows.

The story of the passion will show that the true disciple who accepts to follow Jesus, the Messiah Servant, and who accepts to dedicate his or her life to the service of his or her brothers and sisters, must take up the cross and follow Jesus. If the story of the passion emphasizes defeat and failure, this is not so as to discourage the readers. On the contrary, it is rather to stress that the welcoming and loving of Jesus is stronger than the defeat and failure of the disciples!

- **Mark 14: 3-9: A Faithful Disciple.**

A woman, whose name is not mentioned, anoints Jesus with an expensive perfume (Mk 14: 3). The disciples criticize this gesture. They think it is a waste (Mk 14: 4-5). But Jesus defends her: "Why are you upsetting her? What she has done for Me is a good work... she has anointed My body beforehand for its burial" (Mk 14: 6, 8). In those days, those who died crucified were neither buried nor could they be embalmed. Knowing this, the woman anticipates and anoints the body of Jesus before His sentence and crucifixion. This gesture shows that she accepts Jesus as the Messiah Servant who

will die on the cross. Jesus understands the gesture of the woman and approves of it. Earlier, Peter had rejected the idea of a Crucified Messiah (Mk 8: 32). This anonymous woman is the faithful disciple, model for His disciples who had understood nothing. This model is for all, "throughout all the world" (Mk 14: 9).

- **Mark 14: 10-31: The Disciples' Attitude Towards the Cross**

Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went off to the chief priests to hand him over to them. When they heard him they were pleased and promised to pay him money. Then he looked for an opportunity to hand him over. On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb, his disciples said to him, "Where do you want us to go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?" He sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the city and a man will meet you, carrying a jar of water. Follow him. Wherever he enters, say to the master of the house, 'The Teacher says, "Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?"' Then he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready. Make the preparations for us there. "The disciples then went off, entered the city, and found it just as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover. When it was evening, he came with the Twelve. And as they reclined at table and were eating, Jesus said, "Amen, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me. "They began to be distressed and to say to him, one by one, "Surely it is not I?" He said to them, "One of the Twelve, the one who dips with me into the dish. For the Son of Man indeed goes, as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. It would be better for that man if he had never been born. "While they were eating, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, and said, "Take it; this is my body." Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, and they all drank from it. He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed for many. Amen, I say to you, I shall not drink again the fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God. "Then, after singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. Then Jesus said to them, "All of you will have your faith shaken, for it is written: I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be dispersed. But after I have been raised up, I shall go before you to Galilee. "Peter said to him, 'Even though all should have their faith shaken, mine will not be.'"Then Jesus said to him, 'Amen, I say to you, this very night before the cock crows twice you will deny me three times.' But he vehemently replied, 'Even though I should have to die with you, I will not deny you.' And they all spoke similarly."

- **Mark 14: 10-11: Judas Decides to Betray Jesus.**

In complete contrast with the woman, Judas, one of the twelve, decides to betray Jesus and conspires with the enemies who promise him money. Judas goes on living with Jesus, with the sole objective of finding an occasion to hand Jesus over. When Mark was writing his Gospel, there were disciples who were waiting for the right moment to leave the community that was the cause of their persecution. Or, perhaps, they were waiting for the moment to draw some advantage by handing over their companions.

- **Mark 14: 12-16: Preparation for the Paschal Supper.**

Jesus knows that He will be betrayed. But, in spite of the betrayal by a friend, He lives the Paschal Supper in a fraternal atmosphere with His disciples. He must have spent a lot of money for the hall, "the large upper room furnished with couches" (Mk 14: 15), because this was the eve of Passover. The city was full of people because of the feast. It was difficult to find and reserve a place.

- **Mark 14: 17-21: The Announcement of Judas' Betrayal.**

Together for the last time, Jesus announces that one of His disciples will betray Him, "one of you eating with me!" (Mk 14: 18). This manner of speaking by Mark emphasizes the contrast. For Jews, eating together, the sharing of the table, was the greatest expression of intimacy and trust. Thus, in three lines, Mark conveys the following message to his readers: the betrayal will take place at the hands of a close friend, but the love of Jesus is greater than the betrayal!

- **Mark 14: 22-25: The Eucharist, the Celebration of the Paschal Supper.**

During the celebration, Jesus shares something. He shares bread and wine, an expression of the giving of himself and invites His friends to take His body and His blood. The Evangelist places this gesture of giving (Mk 14: 22-25) between the announcement of the betrayal (Mk 14: 17-21) and the flight and the denial (Mk 14: 26-31). Thus, he emphasizes the contrast between the gesture of Jesus and that of the disciples, he brings out for the community of his time and for all of us the immense gratuitousness of the love of Jesus that overcomes the betrayal, the denial, and the flight of His friends.

- **Mark 14: 26-28: The Announcement of the Flight of All.**

After supper, as He was on His way with the disciples to the mount of Olives, Jesus announces that they would all abandon Him. They will flee and disperse! But even then, He says: "After My resurrection I shall go before you into Galilee!" (Mk 14: 28) They fall away from Jesus, but Jesus does not fall away from them. He goes on waiting for them in the same place, in Galilee, where three years before He had first called them. The certainty of the presence of Jesus in the life of a disciple is stronger than abandonment or flight! It is always possible to come back.

- **Mark 14: 29-31. The Announcement of Peter's Denial.**

Simon, called Cephas (rock), is anything but rock. He already had been "a stumbling block" (Mt 16: 23) and Satan for Jesus (Mk 8: 33), and now he pretends to be the most faithful disciple of all. "Even if all fall away, I will not!" (Mk 14: 29). But Jesus says: Peter, you will be the first to deny Me, even before the cockcrow!

- **Mark 14: 32-52: The Attitude of the Disciples in the Garden of Olives**

Then they came to a place named Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took with him Peter, James, and John, and began to be troubled and distressed. Then he said to them, "My soul is sorrowful even to death. Remain here and keep watch. "He advanced a little and fell to the ground and prayed that if it were possible the hour might pass by him; he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me, but not what I will but what you will. "When he returned, he found them asleep. He said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. "Withdrawing again, he prayed, saying the same thing. Then he returned once more and found them asleep, for they could not keep their eyes open and did not know what to answer him. He returned a third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough. The hour has come. Behold, the Son of Man is to be handed over to sinners. Get up, let us go. See, my betrayer is at hand. "Then, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived, accompanied by a crowd with swords and clubs who had come from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. His betrayer had arranged a signal with them, saying, "The man I shall kiss is the one; arrest him and lead him

away securely. "He came and immediately went over to him and said, "Rabbi." And he kissed him. At this they laid hands on him and arrested him. One of the bystanders drew his sword, struck the high priest's servant, and cut off his ear. Jesus said to them in reply, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs, to seize me? Day after day I was with you teaching in the temple area, yet you did not arrest me; but that the Scriptures may be fulfilled. "And they all left him and fled. Now a young man followed him wearing nothing but a linen cloth about his body. They seized him, but he left the cloth behind and ran off naked.

- **Mark 14: 32-42: The Attitude of the Disciples During Jesus' Agony**

In the Garden, Jesus begins His agony and asks Peter, James, and John to pray for Him. He is sad and begins to be afraid, He seeks the support of His friends. But they fall asleep. They are not able to watch an hour with Him. And this three times! Again, we see an immense contrast between the attitude of Jesus and that of the three disciples! It is here in the Garden and at the time of the agony of Jesus that the courage of the disciples disintegrates. It is also a sign that the disciples didn't fully understand what was to happen.

- **Mark 14: 43-52: The Attitude of the Disciples When Jesus was Arrested**

When night fell, the soldiers led by Judas come. The kiss, a sign of friendship and love, becomes the sign of betrayal. Judas lacks the courage to face his betrayal. He hides it! During His arrest, Jesus stays calm, master of the situation. He tries to read the meaning of what is happening: "This is to fulfill the scriptures!" (Mk 14: 49) But all the disciples left Him and fled (Mk 14: 50). No one stayed. Jesus was alone!

- **Mark 14: 53-15, 20: The Trial: Different Conflicting Views of the Messiah**

They led Jesus away to the high priest, and all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together. Peter followed him at a distance into the high priest's courtyard and was seated with the guards, warming himself at the fire. The chief priests and the entire Sanhedrin kept trying to obtain testimony against Jesus in order to put him to death, but they found none. Many gave false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree. Some took the stand and testified falsely against him, alleging, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with hands and within three days I will build another not made with hands.'" Even so their testimony did not agree. The high priest rose before the assembly and questioned Jesus, saying, "Have you no answer? What are these men testifying against you?" But he was silent and answered nothing. Again, the high priest asked him and said to him, "Are you the Christ, the son of the Blessed One?" Then Jesus answered, "I am; and 'you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven.'" At that the high priest tore his garments and said, "What further need have we of witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" They all condemned him as deserving to die. Some began to spit on him. They blindfolded him and struck him and said to him, "Prophecy!" And the guards greeted him with blows. While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the high priest's maids came along. Seeing Peter warming himself, she looked intently at him and said, "You too were with the Nazarene, Jesus." But he denied it saying, "I neither know nor understand what you are talking about." So he went out into the outer court. Then the cock crowed. The maid saw him and began again to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them." Once again he denied it. A little later the bystanders said to Peter once more, "Surely you are one of them; for you too are a Galilean. "He began to curse and to swear, "I do not know this man about whom you are talking." And immediately a cock crowed a second time. Then Peter remembered the word that

Jesus had said to him, "Before the cock crows twice you will deny me three times." He broke down and wept. As soon as morning came, the chief priests with the elders and the scribes, that is, the whole Sanhedrin held a council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. Pilate questioned him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" He said to him in reply, "You say so." The chief priests accused him of many things. Again, Pilate questioned him, "Have you no answer? See how many things they accuse you of." Jesus gave him no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed. Now on the occasion of the feast he used to release to them one prisoner whom they requested. A man called Barabbas was then in prison along with the rebels who had committed murder in a rebellion. The crowd came forward and began to ask him to do for them as he was accustomed. Pilate answered, "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" For he knew that it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed him over. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. Pilate again said to them in reply, "Then what do you want me to do with the man you call the king of the Jews?" They shouted again, "Crucify him." Pilate said to them, "Why? What evil has he done?" They only shouted the louder, "Crucify him." So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas to them and, after he had Jesus scourged, handed him over to be crucified. The soldiers led him away inside the palace, that is, the praetorian, and assembled the whole cohort. They clothed him in purple and, weaving a crown of thorns, placed it on him. They began to salute him with, "All Hail, King of the Jews!" and kept striking his head with a reed and spitting upon him. They knelt before him in homage. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak, dressed him in his own clothes, and led him out to crucify him.

- **Mark 14: 53-65: Jesus is Condemned by the Sanhedrin**

Jesus is led before the court of the High Priests, of the Elders and the Scribes, called the Sanhedrin. False accusations were made against Him. He keeps quiet. Without any defense, He is handed over to His enemies. He thus fulfills what Isaiah said about the Servant Messiah, who was taken prisoner, judged, and condemned like a lamb. He never opened His mouth (cf. Is 53: 6-8). When interrogated, Jesus accepts the fact that He is the Messiah: "I am," but He accepts this under the title of Son of Man (Mk 14: 62). Finally, He is slapped by people who laugh at Him calling Him Messiah Prophet (Mk 14: 65).

- **Mark 14: 66-72: Peter's Denial**

Peter is recognized by a servant girl as one of those who was in the Garden. Peter denies this. He denies this swearing and cursing. Not even this time is he capable of accepting Jesus as Messiah Servant who gives His life for others. But when the cock crows for the second time, he remembers the words of Jesus and begins to cry. This is what happens to those who are close to people but whose head is lost in the ideology of the Herodians and the Pharisees. This was probably the situation of many in the communities of the time when Mark was writing his Gospel.

- **Mark 15:1-20: Jesus is Sentenced by the Roman Powers**

The trial goes on. Jesus is handed over to the Roman powers and accused of being Messiah King (Mk 15: 2; cf. Mk 15: 26). Others suggest the alternative of Barabbas, "in prison with the rebels" (Mk 15: 7). They see Jesus as an anti-Roman Warring Messiah. After He is sentenced, they spit on Jesus, but He will not open His mouth. Here again we see the Messiah Servant announced by Isaiah (cf Is 50: 6-8).

- **Mark 15: 21-39: Before the Cross of Jesus on Calvary**

They pressed into service a passer-by, Simon, a Cyrenian, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross. They brought him to the place of Golgotha— which is translated Place of the Skull —They gave him wine drugged with myrrh, but he did not take it. Then they crucified him and divided his garments by casting lots for them to see what each should take. It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." With him they crucified two revolutionaries, one on his right and one on his left. Those passing by reviled him, shaking their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself by coming down from the cross. "Likewise, the chief priests, with the scribes, mocked him among themselves and said, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also kept abusing him. At noon darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And at three o'clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthan?*" which is translated, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Some of the bystanders who heard it said, "Look, he is calling Elijah." One of them ran, soaked a sponge with wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink saying, "Wait, let us see if Elijah comes to take him down." Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. The veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. When the centurion who stood facing him saw how he breathed his last he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

- **Mark 15: 21-22: Simon carries the cross**

As Jesus was being led to the place of crucifixion, Simon of Cyrene, the father of a family, was forced to carry the Cross. Simon is the ideal disciple who walks along the way that Jesus walks. He literally carries the cross behind Jesus up to Calvary.

- **Mark 15: 23-32: The Crucifixion.**

Jesus is crucified as one marginalized, between two thieves. Again, the Gospel of Mark recalls the image of the Messiah Servant, of whom Isaiah says: "He was given a grave with the wicked" (Is 53: 9). The crime ascribed to Him is "King of the Jews!" (Mk 15: 25) The religious authorities ridicule and insult Jesus and say: "come down from the cross now, for us to see and believe!" (Mk 15: 32). They are like Peter. They would accept Christ as Messiah if He came down from the cross. As the hymn says: "They wanted a great king who would be strong, dominating, and for this they did not believe in Him and killed the Savior."

- **Mark 15: 33-39: Jesus' Death.**

Abandoned by everyone, Jesus lets out a great cry and dies. The centurion, a pagan, who was keeping guard, makes a solemn profession of faith: "In truth this man was Son of God!" A pagan discovers and accepts what the disciples were not able to discover and accept, that is to see the presence of the Son of God in this tortured, excluded, and crucified human being. Like the anonymous woman at the beginning of these two chapters (Mk 14: 3-9), so at the end there appears another model disciple, the centurion, a pagan!

- **Mark 15: 40-47: At the Sepulcher of Jesus**

There were also women looking on from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of the younger James and of Joseph, and Salome. These women had followed him when he was in Galilee and ministered to him. There were also many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem. When it was already evening, since it was the day of preparation, the day before the sabbath,

Joseph of Arimathea, a distinguished member of the council, who was himself awaiting the kingdom of God, came and courageously went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate was amazed that he was already dead. He summoned the centurion and asked him if Jesus had already died. And when he learned of it from the centurion, he gave the body to Joseph. Having bought a linen cloth, he took him down, wrapped him in the linen cloth, and laid him in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance to the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus watched where he was laid.

- **Mark 15: 40-47: The Burial of Jesus**

A group of women watch from a distance: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome. They do not run away. They remain faithful to the end. They witness the death of Jesus. It is from this little group that the new announcement on Easter Sunday will come. They go with Joseph of Arimathea who has asked permission to bury Jesus. After that, two of them, Magdalene and Mary, stay near the closed sepulcher. They also witness the burial of Jesus.

The Final Failure as a New Call to be Disciple

This is the story of the passion and death of Jesus seen from the point of view of the disciples. The frequency with which this story speaks of the incomprehension and failure of the disciples, most probably corresponds to a historical fact. But the main interest of the Evangelist is not to tell that which took place in the past, rather he wants to provoke a conversion in the Christians of his time and to arouse in them and us a new hope, capable of overcoming discouragement and death. There are three things that stand out and need to be considered deeply:

- ***The failure of those chosen:*** The twelve who were specially called and chosen by Jesus (Mk 3: 13-19) and sent in mission by Him (Mk 16: 7-13), fail. Judas betrays, Peter denies, all run away, no one stays. Total dispersion! Seemingly, there is not much difference between them and the authorities who decree the death of Jesus. Like Peter, they too want to eliminate the cross and want a glorious Messiah, king, blessed son of God. But there is one deep and real difference! The disciples, in spite of all their faults and weaknesses, hold no malice. They do not have any evil intention. They are an almost faithful replica of all of us who *walk the way of Jesus*, falling all the time but always getting up again!
- ***Fidelity of those not chosen:*** As a counterpoint to the failure of some, the strength of faith of others is presented, those who were not part of the chosen twelve:
 - 1. An anonymous woman from Bethany. She accepted Jesus as Messiah Servant and, thus, she anoints Him in anticipation of His burial. Jesus praises her. She is a model for all.
 - 2. Simon of Cyrene, father of a family. He is forced by the soldiers to do that which Jesus had asked of the twelve who ran away. He carries the cross behind Jesus to Calvary.
 - 3. The centurion, a pagan. At the moment of death, he makes his profession of faith and recognizes the Son of God in the tortured and crucified man, one cursed according to Jewish law.
 - 4. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome, "and many other women were there who had come up to Jerusalem with Him" (Mk 15: 41). They did not abandon Jesus, but determinedly

stayed at the foot of the cross and close to the tomb of Jesus.

- 5. Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin, who risked everything by asking for the body of Jesus to bury Him. The twelve failed. The continuation of the message of the Kingdom did not pass through them, but through others, particularly the women, who will be given a clear order to go call back those failed men (Mk 16: 7).
- ***The Attitude of Jesus:*** The manner in which the Gospel of Mark presents the attitude of Jesus during the telling of the passion is meant to give hope even to the most discouraged and failed of the disciples! Because no matter how great the betrayal of the Twelve was, the love of Jesus was always greater! When Jesus announces that the disciples will run away, He already tells them that He will wait for them in Galilee. Even though He knew of the betrayal (Mk 14: 18), the denial (Mk 14: 30), the flight (Mk 14: 27), He goes on with the gesture of the Eucharist. And on the morning of Easter, the angel, through the women, sends a message to Peter who had denied Him, and to all the others who had fled, that they must go to Galilee. The place where everything had begun is the place where everything will begin again. The failure of the twelve does not bring about a break in the covenant signed and sealed in the blood of Jesus.

The Model of the Disciple: Follow, Service, Go Up

Mark emphasizes the presence of the women who follow and serve Jesus from the time He was in Galilee and who came up to Jerusalem with Him (Mk 15: 40-41). Mark uses three verbs to define the relationship of the women with Jesus: Follow! Serve! Come up! They "*followed and looked after*" Jesus and together with many other women "*came up* with Him to Jerusalem" (Mk 15: 41). These are the three words that define an ideal disciple. They are the models for the other disciples who had fled!

- *Follow* describes the call of Jesus and the decision to follow Him (Mk 1: 18). This decision implies leaving everything and running the risk of being killed (Mk 8: 34; 10: 28).
- *Serve* says that they are true disciples, for service is the characteristic of the disciple and of Jesus himself (Mk 10: 42-45).
- *Come up* says that they are qualified witnesses of the death and resurrection of Jesus, because as disciples they will go with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem (Acts 13: 31).

Having witnessed the resurrection of Jesus, they will also witness to what they have seen and experienced. It is the experience of our baptism. "So, by our baptism into His death we were buried with Him, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father's glorious power, we too should begin living a new life" (Rm 6: 4). Through baptism, we all share in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

An Aid to Reflection

- What would you have done were you present? Would you have acted like the men or the women?
- What touched you most in the attitude of Jesus concerning His disciples in the narration of His passion and death? Why?
- What is the special message of the narration of the passion and death in Mark's Gospel? Have you worked out the differences between the narration of the passion

and death in the Gospel of Mark and that in the other Gospels? What are these differences?

Prayer of a Psalm: Psalm 22 (21)

The Psalm that Jesus Prayed on the Cross

My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? The words of My groaning do nothing to save Me.

My God, I call by day but You do not answer, at night, but I find no respite.

Yet You, the Holy One,

who make Your home in the praises of Israel, in You our ancestors put their trust, they trusted and You set them free.

To You they called for help and were delivered; in You they trusted and were not put to shame.

But I am a worm, less than human,

scorn of mankind, contempt of the people; all who see Me jeer at Me,

they sneer and wag their heads, 'He trusted himself to Yahweh, let Yahweh set him free!

Let Him deliver him,

as He took such delight in him.'

It was You who drew Me from the womb and soothed Me on My mother's breast.

On You was I cast from My birth,

from the womb I have belonged to You. Do not hold aloof,

for trouble is upon Me, and no one to help Me!

Many bulls are encircling Me,

wild bulls of Bashan closing in on Me.

Lions ravening and roaring open their jaws at Me. My strength is trickling away,

My bones are all disjointed,

My heart has turned to wax, melting inside Me.

My mouth is dry as earthenware,

My tongue sticks to My jaw.

You lay Me down in the dust of death.

A pack of dogs surrounds Me,

a gang of villains closing in on Me

as if to hack off My hands and My feet. I can count every one of My bones, while they look on and gloat;

they divide My garments among them and cast lots for My clothing.

Yahweh, do not hold aloof!

My strength, come quickly to My help, rescue My soul from the sword,

the one life I have from the grasp of the dog! Save Me from the lion's mouth,
My poor life from the wild bulls' horns!
I shall proclaim Your name to My brothers, praise You in full assembly:
'You who fear Yahweh, praise Him! All the race of Jacob, honor Him!
Revere Him, all the race of Israel!
For He has not despised
nor disregarded the poverty of the poor, has not turned away His face,
but has listened to the cry for help.
Of You is My praise in the thronged assembly,
I will perform My vows before all who fear Him. The poor will eat and be filled,
those who seek Yahweh will praise Him, 'May Your heart live for ever.'
The whole wide world will remember and return to Yahweh,
all the families of nations bow down before Him. For to Yahweh,
ruler of the nations, belongs kingly power!
All who prosper on earth will bow before Him,
all who go down to the dust will do reverence before Him. And those who are dead,
their descendants will serve Him,
will proclaim His name to generations
still to come;
and these will tell of His saving justice
to a people yet unborn: He has fulfilled it.

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 that which 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 25, 2024

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,
You have called Your people to be the servants of one another in the cause of justice and mercy.

You showed us in Jesus, Your Son, what it means to serve and how much this may cost us. Fill us with the Spirit of Jesus, that we too may not break those who are weak nor repel those groping in the dark.

Let Him teach us to serve and to love with compassion for the helpless and respect for the least and the poorest, together with Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 12: 1-11

Six days before Passover Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. They gave a dinner for him there, and Martha served, while Lazarus was one of those reclining at table with him. Mary took a liter of costly perfumed oil made from genuine aromatic spikenard and anointed the feet of Jesus and dried them with her hair; the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil. Then Judas the Iscariot, one of his disciples, and the one who would betray him, said, "Why was this oil not sold for three hundred days' wages and given to the poor?" He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief and held the money bag and used to steal the contributions. So, Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Let her keep this for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." The large crowd of the Jews found out that he was there and came, not only because of him, but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. And the chief priests plotted to kill Lazarus too, because many of the Jews were turning away and believing in Jesus because of him.

Reflection

We have entered into Holy Week, the week of the Passover of Jesus, of His passing from this world to the Father (Jn 13: 1). Liturgy today places before us the beginning of chapter 12 of the Gospel of John, which serves as a link between the Book of the Signs (cc 1-11) and the Book of the Glorification (cc 13-21). At the end of the "Book of Signs" there appears, very clearly, the tension between Jesus and the religious authority of the time (Jn 10: 19-21, 39) and the danger which Jesus was facing. Several times they had tried to kill Him (Jn 10: 31; 11: 8, 53; 12: 10). It was such that Jesus was obliged to lead a clandestine life, because He could be arrested at any moment (Jn 10: 40; 11: 54).

- John 12: 1-2: Jesus persecuted by the Jews, goes to Bethany. Six days before the Passover, Jesus went to Bethany to the house of His friends Martha and Mary and of Lazarus. Bethany means, House of Poverty. The police were looking for Him (Jn 11: 57). They wanted to kill Him (Jn 11: 50). But even now that the police were looking for Jesus, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus received Him in their house and offered Him something to eat. Because love overcomes fear.
- John 12: 3: Mary anoints Jesus. During the meal, Mary anoints the feet of Jesus with a pound of perfume of pure spikenard (cf. Lk 7: 36-50). It was a very costly perfume, so very expensive that it cost three hundred denarii. Then she dried His feet with her hair. The whole house was filled with the scent of the ointment. Mary does not speak during this whole episode. She only acts. The gesture filled with symbolism speaks for itself. In washing the feet, Mary becomes a servant. Jesus will repeat the gesture at the Last Supper (Jn 13: 5).
- John 12: 4-6: Reaction of Judas. Judas criticizes the gesture of Mary. He thinks that it is a waste. In fact, three hundred *denarii* were the wages of three hundred days! The wages of almost a whole year spent in one time alone! Judas thinks that the money should have been given to the poor. The Evangelist comments and says that Judas

had no concern at all for the poor, but that he was a thief. They had a common fund and he stole the money. A strong judgment which condemns Judas. It does not condemn the concern for the poor, but the hypocrisy which uses the poor for self promotion and to enrich oneself. Judas, in his own egoistic interests, thought only about money. This is why he was not aware of what Mary kept in her heart. Jesus reads the heart and defends Mary.

- John 12: 7-8: Jesus defends the woman, Judas thinks only of the waste and criticizes the woman. Jesus thinks of the gesture and defends the woman: "Leave her alone; so that she can keep it for the day of My burial!" And immediately Jesus says: "You have the poor with you always; you will not always have Me!" Which of the two lived closer to Jesus: Judas or Mary? Judas, the disciple, lived together with Jesus for almost three years, twenty-four hours a day. He was part of the group. Mary saw Him once or twice a year, on the occasion of some feast, when Jesus went to Jerusalem and visited her in her house. But to live together with, not having any love does not help us to know others. Rather it blinds people. Judas was blind. Many people live together with Jesus and praise Him even with many hymns, but do not truly know Him and do not reveal Him (cf. Mt 7:21). Two affirmations of Jesus merit a more detailed comment: (a) "You have the poor with you always" and (b) "let her keep it for the day of My burial."
- "You have the poor with you always." Is it perhaps that Jesus wants to say that we should not be concerned about the poor, given the fact that there will always be poor? Or does He want to say that poverty is the destiny imposed by God? How is this phrase to be understood? At that time, people knew the Old Testament by heart. It sufficed for Jesus to begin quoting a phrase of the Old Testament and persons already knew the rest. The beginning of the phrase said: "There will never cease to be poor people in the country" (Dt 15: 11^a). The rest of the phrase which people already knew and which Jesus wants to remind is the following: "And this is why I am giving you this command: always be open handed with your brother, and with anyone in your country who is in need and is poor!" (Dt 15:11b). According to this Law, the community should accept the poor and share its goods with them. But Judas instead of "opening his hand to help the poor" and to share his goods with them, wanted to do charity with the money of others! He wanted to sell the perfume of Mary for three hundred denarii and use it to help the poor. Jesus quotes the Law of God which taught the contrary. Anyone, who like Judas, carries out a campaign with the money from the sale of the goods of another, does not disturb or trouble. But, the one who, like Jesus, insists on the obligation to accept the poor and to share with them one's own goods, this one disturbs, troubles and runs the risk of being condemned.
- John 12: 9-11: The crowds and the authority. To be the friend of Jesus could be dangerous. Lazarus is in danger of death because of the new life received from Jesus. The Jews had decided to kill Him. Lazarus alive was a living proof that Jesus was the Messiah. This is why the crowd was looking for Him, because people wanted to experience closely the living proof of the power of Jesus. A living community runs the risk of its life because it is the living proof of the Good News of God!

Personal Questions

- Mary was misinterpreted by Judas. Have you been misinterpreted sometimes?
- Do I actually serve the poor, or do I just share the goods of others?

- Are lavish expenses on church buildings and decorations a case of worshiping Jesus as Mary did, or is taking from the poor?

Concluding Prayer

Yahweh is my light and my salvation, whom should I fear?

Yahweh is the fortress of my life, whom should I dread? (Ps 27: 1)

Tuesday, March 26, 2024

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,

Your Son Jesus Christ had to undergo the humiliation of being betrayed and denied

by those He called His friends. But He made His suffering and death into instruments of love and reconciliation.

Make us with Him, people-for-others, who accept difficulties, even betrayals and misunderstanding of our best intentions, and turn them into sources of life and joy for those around us.

Keep us faithful to You and to one another through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 13: 21-33, 36-38

Reclining at table with his disciples, Jesus was deeply troubled and testified, "Amen, amen, I say to you, one of you will betray me." The disciples looked at one another, at a loss as to whom he meant. One of his disciples, the one whom Jesus loved, was reclining at Jesus' side. So, Simon Peter nodded to him to find out whom he meant. He leaned back against Jesus' chest and said to him, "Master, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I hand the morsel after I have dipped it." So, he dipped the morsel and took it and handed it to Judas, son of Simon the Iscariot. After Judas took the morsel, Satan entered him. So, Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." Now none of those reclining at table realized why he said this to him. Some thought that since Judas kept the money bag, Jesus had told him, "Buy what we need for the feast," or to give something to the poor. So, Judas took the morsel and left at once. And it was night. When he had left, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and he will glorify him at once. My children, I will be with you only a little while longer. You will look for me, and as I told the Jews, 'Where I go you cannot come,' so now I say it to you." Simon Peter said to him, "Master, where are you going?" Jesus answered him, "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now, though you will follow later." Peter said to him, "Master, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? Amen, amen, I say to you, the cock will not crow before you deny me three times."

Reflection

This is the third day of Holy Week. The texts of the Gospel of these days place before us the terrible facts which will lead to the imprisonment and condemnation of Jesus. The texts not only present the decisions of the religious and civil authority against Jesus, but also the betrayal and the negotiations of the disciples which rendered it possible for the authority to arrest Jesus and contributed enormously to the suffering of Jesus.

- John 13: 21: The announcement of the betrayal. After having washed the feet of the disciples (Jn 13: 2-11) and having spoken about the obligation that we have of washing each other's feet (Jn 13: 12-16), Jesus is profoundly touched. And it is no wonder. He was fulfilling that gesture of service and total gift of self, while at His side one of the disciples was planning how to betray Him that same night. Jesus expresses His emotion saying: "In all truth I tell you one of you is going to betray Me!" He does not say: "Judas will betray Me," but "one of you." It is one of His group who will betray Him.
- John 13: 22-25: The reaction of the disciples. The disciples are frightened. They did not expect that declaration, that is, that one of them would be the traitor. Peter makes a sign to John to ask Jesus which of the twelve would be the traitor. This is a sign that they did not know one another well, they could not succeed in understanding who could be the traitor. A sign, that is, that the friendship among them had not as yet reached the same transparency that Jesus had with them (cf. Jn 15: 15). John reclined near Jesus and asked Him: "Who is it?"
- John 13: 26-30: Jesus indicates Judas. Jesus says: "It is the one to whom I give the piece of bread that I dip in the dish." He took a piece of bread, dips it in the cup and hands it over to Judas. This was a common and normal gesture which the participants at a supper used to do among themselves. And Jesus tells Judas: "What you are going to do, do quickly!" Judas had charge of the common fund. He was in charge of buying things and of giving the alms to the poor. This is why no one perceived anything special in the gesture and in the words of Jesus. In this description of the announcement of the betrayal is evoked the Psalm in which the psalmist complains about the friend who betrays Him: "Even My trusted friend on whom I relied, who shared My table takes advantage of Me" (Ps 41: 10; cf. Ps 55: 13-15). Judas becomes aware that Jesus knew everything (cf. Jn 13: 18). But even knowing it, he does not change his mind but keeps the decision to betray Jesus. This is the moment in which the separation between Judas and Jesus takes place. John says at this moment Satan entered him. Judas rises and leaves. He places himself at the side of the enemy (Satan). John comments: "It was night." It was dark.
- John 13: 31-33: The glorification of Jesus begins. It is as if history had waited for this moment of separation between light and darkness. Satan (the enemy) and darkness entered into Judas when he decides to carry out what he was planning. In that moment the light was made in Jesus who declares: "Now the son of man has been glorified, and in Him God has been glorified also. 32 If God has been glorified in Him, God will in turn glorify Him in Himself, and will glorify Him very soon!" The decisions had already been taken by Jesus (Jn 12: 27-28) and now by Judas. The facts follow one another hastily. And Jesus announces it: "Little children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for Me, and, as I told the Jews, where I am going you cannot come." There is little time left before the Passover.
- John 13: 34-35: The new commandment. Today's Gospel omits these two verses on the new commandment of love and begins to speak about the announcement of the denial of Peter.
- John 13: 36-38: Announcement of the denial of Peter. Together with the betrayal of Judas, the Gospel also speaks of the denial of Peter. These are the two facts which

contribute the most to Jesus' suffering and pain. Peter says that he is ready to give his life for Jesus. Jesus recalls and reminds him of reality: "You are ready to lay down your life for Me? In all truth I tell you, before the cock crows you will have disowned Me three times." Mark had written: "Before the cock crows twice, you will have disowned Me three times" (Mk 14: 30). Everybody knows that the cock crows rapidly. When in the morning the first cock begins to sing, almost at the same time all the cocks crow together. Peter is more rapid in his denial than the cock in crowing.

Personal Questions

- Do I love so much as to protect someone who betrays me too?
- Satan prowls like a lion looking to devour souls. It happened to Judas. What do I do to prevent Satan from entering me?

Concluding Prayer

You are my hope, Lord, my trust, Yahweh, since boyhood. On You I have relied since my birth, since my mother's womb You have been my portion, the constant theme of my praise. (Ps 71: 5-6)

Wednesday, March 27, 2024

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

God our Father,

when the hour of Your Son Jesus had come to accept suffering and death out of love of You and His saving love for us, He did not refuse that suffering and deep pain.

In the hour of trial that we may have to pass through, do not let us become rebellious but keep us trusting in You, for You save us through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 26: 14-25

One of the Twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" They paid him thirty pieces of silver, and from that time on he looked for an opportunity to hand him over. On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the disciples approached Jesus and said, "Where do you want us to prepare for you to eat the Passover?" He said, "Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, 'The teacher says, my appointed time draws near; in your house I shall celebrate the Passover with my disciples.'"" The disciples then did as Jesus had ordered, and prepared the Passover. When it was evening, he reclined at table with the Twelve. And while they were eating, he said, "Amen, I say to you, one of you will betray me." Deeply distressed at this, they began to say to him one after another, "Surely it is not I, Lord?" He said in reply, "He who has dipped his hand into the dish with me is the one who will betray me. The Son of Man indeed goes, as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. It would be better for that man if he had never been born." Then Judas, his betrayer, said in reply, "Surely it is not I, Rabbi?" He answered, "You have said so."

Reflection

Yesterday the Gospel spoke of the betrayal of Judas and of the denial of Peter. Today, it speaks once again of the betrayal of Judas. In the description of the Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, the failure of the disciples is strongly stressed. In spite of having lived three years together with Jesus, not one of them defends Jesus. Judas betrays Him, Peter denies Him, and the others flee. Matthew narrates everything, not to criticize or to condemn, neither to discourage the readers, but in order to underline that acceptance and the love of Jesus exceed the defeat and the failure of the disciples! This way of describing the attitude of Jesus was a help for the Communities at the time of Matthew. Because of the frequent persecutions, many were discouraged and had abandoned the community and asked themselves: "Will it be possible to return? Will God accept and forgive us?" Matthew responds by suggesting that we can break the relationship with Jesus, but Jesus never breaks it with us. His love is greater than our infidelity. This is a very important message which we get from the Gospel during Holy Week.

- Matthew 26: 14-16: The Decision of Judas to betray Jesus. Judas took the decision after Jesus did not accept the criticism of the disciples concerning the woman who wastes a very expensive perfume only to anoint Jesus (Mt 26: 6-13). He went to the chief priest and asked: "What are you prepared to give Me if I hand Him over to you?" They agreed on the sum of thirty silver pieces. Matthew recalls the words of the Prophet Zechariah to describe the price agreed upon (Zc 11, 12). At the same time, the betrayal of Jesus for thirty silver coins recalls the sale of Joseph by his brothers, decided by the buyers for twenty coins (Gn 37: 28). It also is reminiscent of the price of thirty coins to be paid for the wounding of a slave (Ex 21: 32).
- Matthew 26: 17-19: The preparation for the Passover. Jesus was coming from Galilee. He did not have a house in Jerusalem. He spent the night in the Garden of Olives (cf. Jn 8: 1). In the days of the feast of the Passover the people of Jerusalem increased three times in number because of the enormous number of pilgrims who went there from all parts. For Jesus it was not easy to find a big room to celebrate the Passover together with the pilgrims coming from Galilee. He ordered His disciples to find a person in whose house He had decided to celebrate the Passover. The Gospel does not offer any other information and allows the imagination to complete what is missing in the information. Was this a person known by Jesus? A relative? A disciple? Throughout the centuries the imagination of the Apocrypha has tried to complete this information, but with little credibility.
- Matthew 26: 20-25: The announcement of the betrayal of Judas. Jesus knew that He will be betrayed. In spite of the fact that Judas did things secretly. Jesus knew. But in spite of that, He wants to act fraternally with the group of friends to which Judas belongs. When all were together for the last time, Jesus announces who is the traitor "Someone who has dipped his hand into the dish with Me will betray Me." This way of announcing the betrayal renders even clearer the contrast. For the Jews, the communion around the table, to dip the hand together in the same dish, was the maximum expression of intimacy and trust. In this way, Matthew suggests that in spite of the betrayal made by someone who was a friend, the love of Jesus is greater than the betrayal!

What strikes us in the way in which Matthew describes these facts? Between the denial and the betrayal there is the institution of the Eucharist (Mt 26: 26-29): the betrayal of Judas first (Mt 26: 20-25); the denial of Peter and the flight of the disciples, afterwards (Mt 25: 30-35). Thus, he stressed for us the incredible love of Jesus, which

exceeds the betrayal, the denial, and the flight of the friends. His love does not depend on what others do for Him.

Personal Questions

- It seems obvious that Judas will betray Jesus from our reading the Gospel but put yourself there at the time. Would you have suspected one of your close group to do this? How would you interpret the indications Jesus was giving at the time?
- In Holy Week it is important to reserve some moments to become aware of the unbelievable gratuity of God's love for me.

Concluding Prayer

Sing to God, play music to His name, build a road for the Rider of the Clouds, rejoice in Yahweh, dance before Him.

Father of orphans, defender of widows, such is God in His holy dwelling. (Ps 68: 4-5)

Thursday, March 28, 2024

Thursday of Holy Week: Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper

Lectio

Initial Prayer

"When You speak, Lord, the nothingness beats in life: the dry bones become living persons, the desert flourishes... When I get ready to pray I feel dry, I do not know what to say. Evidently, I am not in harmony with Your will, my lips are not in tune with my heart, my heart does not make an effort to get in tune with yours. Renew my heart, purify my lips so that I can speak with You as You want me to, so that I can speak with others as You wish, so that I can speak with myself, with my interior world, as You wish." (*L. Renna*)

The Reading of the Gospel - John 13: 1-15

Before the feast of Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father. He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end. The devil had already induced Judas, son of Simon the Iscariot, to hand him over. So, during supper, fully aware that the Father had put everything into his power and that he had come from God and was returning to God, he rose from supper and took off his outer garments. He took a towel and tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and dry them with the towel around his waist. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Master, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing, you do not understand now, but you will understand later." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Master, then not only my feet, but my hands and head as well." Jesus said to him, "Whoever has bathed has no need except to have his feet washed, for he is clean all over; so you are clean, but not all." For he knew who would betray him; for this reason, he said, "Not all of you are clean." So when he had washed their feet and put his garments back on and reclined at table again, he said to them, "Do you realize what I

have done for you? You call me 'teacher' and 'master,' and rightly so, for indeed I am. If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do."

Moments of Prayerful Silence

In a loving listening, words are not necessary, because silence also speaks and communicates love.

Meditatio

Preamble to the Passover of Jesus

The passage of the Gospel of today is inserted in a literary whole which includes chapters 13-17. At the beginning we have the account of the Last Supper which Jesus shares with His disciples, during which He fulfills the gesture of the washing of the feet (13: 1-30). Then Jesus interweaves a long dialogue of farewell with His disciples (13: 31 – 14: 31). Chapters 15-17 have the function to further deepen the previous discourse of the Master. Immediately after this, Jesus is arrested (18:1-11). In any case, these events narrated in 13: 17, 26 are joined in 13: 1 with the Passover of Jesus. It is interesting to note this last annotation: from 12: 1 the Passover is no longer called the Passover of the Jews, but of Jesus. From now on, it is He, the Lamb of God who will liberate people from sin. The Passover of Jesus is one that aims to liberate us: a new exodus which permits us to go from darkness to light (8: 12), and which will bear life and feast in humanity (7: 37).

Jesus is aware that He is about to conclude His journey toward the Father and, therefore He is about to bring to an end His personal and definitive exodus. Such a passage, going to the Father, takes place through the Cross, the central moment in which Jesus will surrender His life for the good of all humanity.

It is striking when the reader becomes aware how the Evangelist John knows how to present the person of Jesus well, while He is aware of the last events of His life and therefore, of His mission. So as to affirm that Jesus is not crushed or overcome by the events which threaten His life, but that He is ready to give His life. Before, the Evangelist has remarked that His hour had not arrived; but now in the account of the washing of the feet He says that He is aware that His hour is close at hand. Such a conscience is at the basis of the expression of John: "After having loved those who were His in the world, He loved them to the end" (v. 1). Love for "His own," for those who form the new community, has been evident while He was with them, but it will shine in an eminent way in His death. Jesus shows such a love in the gesture of the washing of the feet, which in its symbolical value shows the continuous love which is expressed in service.

The Washing of the Feet

Jesus is at an ordinary supper with His disciples. He is fully conscious of the mission which the Father has entrusted to Him: the salvation of humanity depends on Him. With such an awareness He wishes to show "to His own," through the washing of the feet, how the work of salvation of the Father is fulfilled and to indicate in such a gesture the surrender of His life for the salvation of all. It is the will of Jesus that we be saved, and a longing desire leads Him to give up His life and to surrender. He is aware that the Father gives Jesus complete freedom of action.

Besides, Jesus knows that His true provenance and the goal of His itinerary is God; He knows that His death on the Cross, the maximum expression of His love, is the last

moment of His journey of salvation. His death is an “exodus”; it is the climax of His victory over death, in His surrender (giving His life) Jesus reveals to us the presence of God as the fullness of life and exemption from death.

With this full consciousness of His identity and of His complete liberty Jesus is prepared to fulfill the great and humble gesture of the washing of the feet. Such a gesture of love is described with a great number of verbs (eight) which render the scene absorbing, enthralling and full of significance. The Evangelist, in presenting the last action of Jesus toward His own, uses this rhetorical figure of the accumulation of verbs without repeating himself in order that such a gesture remains impressed in the heart and mind of His disciples and of every reader and in order that a commandment may always be remembered, not forgotten. The gesture fulfilled by Jesus intends to show that true love is expressed in tangible actions of service. Jesus removes His garments and ties around His waist a towel or apron, a symbol of service. He shows them that love is expressed in service, in giving one's life for others as He has done.

At the time of Jesus, the washing of the feet was a gesture which expressed hospitality and welcome towards the guests. In an ordinary way it was done by a slave or also by the wife, and also the daughters toward their father. Besides, it was the custom that such a rite of the washing of the feet should be done before they sat at table and not during the meal. Such an insertion of Jesus' action intends to stress or underline how singular or significant His gesture was.

And thus, Jesus gets down to wash the feet of His disciples. The repeated use of the apron which Jesus tied around His waist underlines the attitude of service which is a permanent attribute of the person of Jesus. In fact, when He finishes the washing of the feet, Jesus does not take off the towel which He used as an apron. Such a detail intends to underline that the service-love does not end with His death. This minute detail shows the intention of the Evangelist to underline the significance and importance of the gesture of Jesus. By washing the feet of His disciples Jesus intends to show them His love, which is one with that of the Father (10:30.38). This image with which Jesus reveals God is really shocking: He is not a sovereign who resides exclusively in Heaven, but He presents himself as the servant of humanity in order to raise it to the divine level. From this divine service flows, for the community of believers, that liberty which comes from the love which renders all its members as “lords” (free) because they are servants. It is like saying that only liberty creates the true love. From now on, service which the believers will render to others will have the purpose of restoring the relationship among people in whom equality and liberty are a consequence of the practice of reciprocal service. Jesus, with His gesture intends to show that any domination over another is contrary to the attitude of God who, instead, serves people to raise them to himself. The pretension of superiority of one person over another no longer has any sense, because the community founded by Jesus does not have any pyramidal characteristics, but horizontal dimensions, in which each one is at the service of others, following the example of God and of Jesus.

In synthesis, the gesture which Jesus fulfilled expresses the following values: the love toward brothers and sisters demands expression in fraternal acceptance, hospitality, and permanent service.

Peter's Resistance

The reaction of Peter before the gesture of Jesus is expressed in attitudes of surprise and protest. There is also a change in the way in which he related to Jesus: Peter calls Him “Lord” (13: 6). In such a title Jesus is recognized as having a level of superiority which is in conflict with the “washing” of the feet, an action which belongs, instead, to an inferior subject. The protest is expressed energetically by the words: “Are You going to wash my feet?” In Peter's eyes this humiliating gesture of the washing of the feet

seemed to him as an inversion of values which regulate the relationship between Jesus and others: the first one is the Master, Peter is a subject. Peter disapproves the equality which Jesus wants to create among people.

To such misunderstanding Jesus responds inviting Peter to accept the sense of washing his feet as a witness of His love toward him. More precisely, He wants to offer him a concrete proof of how He and the Father love him.

But Peter in his reaction does not give in: he categorically refuses that Jesus should get down at his feet. It is not acceptable that Jesus abandons His position of superiority to render himself equal to His disciples. Such an idea of the Master disorients Peter and leads him to protest. Not accepting the service of love of his Master, he neither accepts that He dies on the cross for him (12: 34; 13: 37). It seems to say that Peter is far away from understanding what is true love, and such an obstacle is an impediment so that Jesus can show it to him by His action.

In the meantime, if Peter is not ready to share the dynamics of love which manifests itself in reciprocal service he cannot share the friendship with Jesus and truly runs the risk of excluding himself.

Following the admonition of Jesus "If I do not wash you, you can have no share with Me" (v. 8), Peter adheres to the threatening words of the Master, but without accepting the profound sense of the action of Jesus. He shows himself open, ready to let Jesus wash his feet, not only the feet, but also his hands and head. It seems that it is easier for Peter to accept Jesus' gesture as an action of purification or ablution rather than as a service. But Jesus responds that the disciples have become pure ("clean") at the moment when they accepted to allow themselves to be guided by the Word of the Master, rejecting that of the world. Peter and the disciples no longer need the Jewish rite of the purification but to allow themselves to have their feet washed by Jesus; or rather to allow themselves to be loved by Him, conferring them dignity and liberty.

The Memorial of Love

At the end of the washing of the feet Jesus intends to give His action a permanent validity for His community and at the same time to leave to it a memorial or commandment which should always regulate the fraternal relationships.

Jesus is the Lord, not in domination, but in so far as He communicates the love of the Father (His Spirit) which makes us children of God and qualified to imitate Jesus who freely gives His love to His own. Jesus intended to communicate such an interior attitude to His own, a love which does not exclude anyone, not even Judas who is about to betray Him. Therefore, if the disciples call Him Lord, they have to imitate Him; if they consider Him Master, they have to listen to Him.

Some Questions to Meditate On

- He got up from the table: How do you live the Eucharist? In a sedentary way or do you allow yourself to be moved to action by the fire of the love which you receive? Do you run the risk that the Eucharist in which you participate is lost in contemplative Narcissism, without leading to the commitment of solidarity and sharing?
- He removed His outer garments: when you go from the Eucharist to daily life, do you know how to remove the garments of your own benefit, your calculations, personal interests to allow yourself to be guided by an authentic love toward others?
- Taking a towel He wrapped it around His waist: this is the image of the "Church of the apron." In the life of your family, of your ecclesial community, do you walk on the

street of service? Are you directly involved in the service to the poor and to the least? Do you know how to see the face of Christ who asks to be served and loved in the poor?

Oratio

Psalm 116 (114-115), 12-13; 15-16; 17-18

The Psalmist who finds himself in the time and in the presence of the liturgical assembly sings his sacrifice of thanksgiving. Voltaire who had a special predilection for v. 12 expressed himself as follows: "What can I offer to the Lord for all the gifts which He has given me?"

What return can I make to Yahweh for His generosity to me?

I shall take up the cup of salvation and call on the name of Yahweh.

Costly in Yahweh's sight is the death of His faithful. I beg You, Yahweh!

I am Your servant, I am Your servant and my mother was Your servant;

You have undone my fetters.

I shall offer You a sacrifice of thanksgiving and call on the name of Yahweh.

I shall fulfill my vows to Yahweh, witnessed by all His people

Final Prayer

Fascinated with the way in which God expressed His love toward His own, Origen prayed as follows:

Jesus, come, my feet are dirty.

Become a servant for me, pour the water in the basin; come, wash my feet.

I know it, what I am saying is daring, but I fear the threat of Your words:

"If I do not wash you, you can have no share with me." Wash then my feet, so that I may have a share with you. (*Homily 5 on Isaiah*)

And Saint Ambrose having an ardent desire to correspond to the love of Jesus, expresses himself as follows:

Oh, my Lord Jesus, allow me to wash Your sacred feet;

You got them dirty when You walked in my soul... But where will I take the water from the fountain to wash Your feet?

In lacking that I only have the eyes to weep:

bathing Your feet with my tears, do in such a way that I myself remain purified.
(*Treatise on Penance*).

Friday, March 29, 2024

Good Friday: The Passion of the Lord

Recollection in Prayer – *Statio*

Come, You who refresh us, the soul's delightful guest, come take away all that is mine, and pour into me all that is yours.

Come, You who are the nourishment of every chaste thought, source of all mercies, sum of all purity.

Come and burn away all that in me is cause of my not being able to be consumed by You. Come, Spirit, who are ever with the Father and the Bridegroom, and rest over the brides of the Bridegroom.

(St. Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi, O. Carm., in La Probatione ii, 193-194.)

A Prayerful Reading of the Word – *Lectio*

Gospel Reading - John 18: 1 – 19: 42

Jesus went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to where there was a garden, into which he and his disciples entered. Judas his betrayer also knew the place, because Jesus had often met there with his disciples. So Judas got a band of soldiers and guards from the chief priests and the Pharisees and went there with lanterns, torches, and weapons. Jesus, knowing everything that was going to happen to him, went out and said to them, "Whom are you looking for?" They answered him, "Jesus the Nazorean." He said to them, "I AM." Judas his betrayer was also with them. When he said to them, "I AM," they turned away and fell to the ground. So he again asked them, "Whom are you looking for?" They said, "Jesus the Nazorean." Jesus answered, "I told you that I AM. So if you are looking for me, let these men go." This was to fulfill what he had said, "I have not lost any of those you gave me."

Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus. Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword into its scabbard. Shall I not drink the cup that the Father gave me?"

So the band of soldiers, the tribune, and the Jewish guards seized Jesus, bound him, and brought him to Annas first. He was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year. It was Caiaphas who had counseled the Jews that it was better that one man should die rather than the people.

Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Now the other disciple was known to the high priest, and he entered the courtyard of the high priest with Jesus. But Peter stood at the gate outside. So, the other disciple, the acquaintance of the high priest, went out and spoke to the gatekeeper and brought Peter in. Then the maid who was the gatekeeper said to Peter, "You are not one of this man's disciples, are you?" He said, "I am not." Now the slaves and the guards were standing around a charcoal fire that they had made, because it was cold, and were warming themselves. Peter was also standing there keeping warm.

The high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his doctrine. Jesus answered him, "I have spoken publicly to the world. I have always taught in a synagogue or in the temple area where all the Jews gather, and in secret I have said nothing. Why ask me? Ask those who heard me what I said to them. They know what I said." When he had said this, one of the temple guards standing there struck Jesus and said, "Is this the way you answer the high priest?" Jesus answered him, "If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong; but if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?" Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

Now Simon Peter was standing there keeping warm. And they said to him, "You are not one of his disciples, are you?" He denied it and said, "I am not." One of the slaves of the

high priest, a relative of the one whose ear Peter had cut off, said, "Didn't I see you in the garden with him?" Again, Peter denied it. And immediately the cock crowed.

Then they brought Jesus from Caiaphas to the praetorium. It was morning. And they themselves did not enter the praetorium, in order not to be defiled so that they could eat the Passover. So, Pilate came out to them and said, "What charge do you bring against this man?" They answered and said to him, "If he were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you." At this, Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves, and judge him according to your law." The Jews answered him, "We do not have the right to execute anyone," in order that the word of Jesus might be fulfilled that he said indicating the kind of death he would die.

So, Pilate went back into the praetorium and summoned Jesus and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you say this on your own or have others told you about me?" Pilate answered, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom did belong to this world, my attendants would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not here." So Pilate said to him, "Then you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say I am a king. For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate said to him, "What is truth?" When he had said this, he again went out to the Jews and said to them, "I find no guilt in him. But you have a custom that I release one prisoner to you at Passover. Do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?" They cried out again, "Not this one but Barabbas!"

Now Barabbas was a revolutionary. Then Pilate took Jesus and had him scourged. And the soldiers wove a crown out of thorns and placed it on his head, and clothed him in a purple cloak, and they came to him and said, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they struck him repeatedly.

Once more Pilate went out and said to them, "Look, I am bringing him out to you, so that you may know that I find no guilt in him." So, Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple cloak. And he said to them, "Behold, the man!" When the chief priests and the guards saw him, they cried out, "Crucify him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him. I find no guilt in him." The Jews answered, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God." Now when Pilate heard this statement, he became even more afraid, and went back into the praetorium and said to Jesus, "Where are you from?" Jesus did not answer him. So, Pilate said to him, "Do you not speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you and I have power to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me if it had not been given to you from above. For this reason, the one who handed me over to you has the greater sin." Consequently, Pilate tried to release him; but the Jews cried out, "If you release him, you are not a Friend of Caesar. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar."

When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and seated him on the judge's bench in the place called Stone Pavement, in Hebrew, *Gabbatha*. It was preparation day for Passover, and it was about noon. And he said to the Jews, "Behold, your king!" They cried out, "Take him away, take him away! Crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your king?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar." Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

So, they took Jesus, and, carrying the cross himself, he went out to what is called the Place of the Skull, in Hebrew, *Golgotha*. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus in the middle. Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus the Nazorean, the King of the Jews." Now

many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write 'The King of the Jews,' but that he said, 'I am the King of the Jews.'" Pilate answered, "What I have written, I have written."

When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four shares, a share for each soldier. They also took his tunic, but the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top down. So, they said to one another, "Let's not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it will be," in order that the passage of Scripture might be fulfilled that says: They divided my garments among them, and for my vesture they cast lots. This is what the soldiers did.

Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his home.

After this, aware that everything was now finished, in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I thirst." There was a vessel filled with common wine. So they put a sponge soaked in wine on a sprig of hyssop and put it up to his mouth. When Jesus had taken the wine, he said, "It is finished." And bowing his head, he handed over the spirit. *(Here pause for a short time)*

Now since it was preparation day, in order that the bodies might not remain on the cross on the sabbath, for the sabbath day of that week was a solemn one, the Jews asked Pilate that their legs be broken and that they be taken down. So, the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and then of the other one who was crucified with Jesus. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs, but one soldier thrust his lance into his side, and immediately blood and water flowed out. An eyewitness has testified, and his testimony is true; he knows that he is speaking the truth, so that you also may come to believe. For this happened so that the Scripture passage might be fulfilled: Not a bone of it will be broken. And again another passage says: They will look upon him whom they have pierced.

After this, Joseph of Arimathea, secretly a disciple of Jesus for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate if he could remove the body of Jesus. And Pilate permitted it. So, he came and took his body. Nicodemus, the one who had first come to him at night, also came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing about one hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and bound it with burial cloths along with the spices, according to the Jewish burial custom.

Now in the place where he had been crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had yet been buried. So they laid Jesus there because of the Jewish preparation day; for the tomb was close by.

Reflecting on the Word – Meditatio

A Key to the Reading:

- **Jesus Master of His Fate**

I would like to suggest that we meditate in the spirit of Mary, at the foot of the cross of Jesus. She, the strong woman who understood the full meaning of this event of the passion and death of the Lord, will help us cast a contemplative glance at the crucified (Jn 1: 5–27). We are looking at chapter 19 of John's Gospel, which begins with the scene of the scourging and the crowning with thorns. Pilate presents "Jesus the Nazarene, the king of the Jews" to the chief priests and to the guards who call for His

death on the cross (Jn 1:). Thus, Jesus begins the way of the cross towards Golgotha, where He will be crucified. In the story of the Passion according to John, Jesus reveals himself as master of himself and in control of all that is happening to Him. John's text is full of phrases that point to this theological fact, that Jesus offers His life. He actively, not passively, endures the events of the passion. Here are just some examples putting the stress on some phrases and words. The reader may find other examples: Knowing everything that was to happen to Him, Jesus came forward and said: "Who are you looking for?" They answered, "Jesus the Nazarene." He said, "I am He!" Now Judas the traitor was standing among them. When Jesus said to them "I am He," they moved back and fell on the ground. He asked them a second time, "Who are you looking for?" They said, "Jesus the Nazarene." Jesus replied, "I have told you that I am He. If I am the one you are looking for, let these others go." This was to fulfill the words He had spoken, "Not one of those You gave me have I lost." (Jn 1: 9)

"Jesus then came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe" (Jn 1:), Jesus replied, "You would have no power over me at all, if it had not been given you from above." (Jn 1: 1).

On the cross too, Jesus takes an active part in His death, He does not allow himself to be killed like the thieves whose legs were broken (Jn 1: 1-33) but commits His spirit (Jn 1:0). The details recalled by the Evangelist are very important: Seeing His mother and the disciple whom He loved standing near her, Jesus said to His mother, "Woman, this is your son." Then to the disciple He said, "This is your mother." (Jn 1: 6-27).

These simple words of Jesus bear the weight of revelation, words that reveal to us His will: "this is your son" (v. 26); "this is your mother" (v. 27). These words also recall those pronounced by Pilate on the Lithostrotos: "This is the man" (Jn 1:). With these words, Jesus on the cross, His throne, reveals His will and His love for us. He is the lamb of God, the shepherd who gives His life for His sheep. At that moment, by the cross, He gives birth to the Church, represented by Mary, her sister (or sister-in-law) Mary of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene, together with the beloved disciple (Jn 1: 5).

- **Beloved and faithful disciples**

The fourth Gospel specifies that these disciples "stood by the cross" (Jn 1:5-26). This detail has a deep meaning. Only the fourth Gospel tells us that these five persons stood by the cross. The other Evangelists do not say so. Luke, for instance, says that all those who knew Him followed the events from a distance (Lk 2:9). Matthew also says that many women followed these events from afar. These women had followed Jesus from Galilee and served Him. But now they followed Him from afar (Mt 2:5-56).

Like Matthew, Mark gives us the names of those who followed the death of Jesus from afar (Mk 1:0-41). Thus only the fourth Gospel says that the mother of Jesus and the other women and the beloved disciple "stood by the cross." They stood there like servants before their king. They are present courageously at a time when Jesus has already declared that "it is fulfilled" (Jn 1:0). The mother of Jesus is present at the hour that finally "has come." That hour foretold at the wedding feast of Cana (Jn 2:1 ff). The fourth Gospel had remarked then that "the mother of Jesus was there" (Jn 2:1). Thus the person that remains faithful to the Lord in his destiny, he/she is a beloved disciple. The Evangelist keeps this disciple anonymous so that each one of us may see him/herself mirrored in the one who knew the mysteries of the Lord, who laid his head on Jesus' chest at the last supper (Jn 13:25).

Questions and Suggestions to Direct our Meditation and Practice

- Read once more the passage of the Gospel and look in the Bible for the texts mentioned in the key to the reading. Look for other parallel texts that may help us penetrate deeper into the text presented for our meditation.
- In spirit, and with the help of the prayerful reading of John's text, visit the places of the Passion, stop on Calvary to witness with Mary and the beloved disciple the events of the Passion.
- What struck you most?
- What feelings does this story of the Passion arouse in you?
- What does the fact that Jesus actively bears His passion mean for you?

Oratio

O Eternal Wisdom, Infinite Goodness, Ineffable Truth, You who probe hearts, Eternal God, help us to understand that You can, know and want to! O Loving and Bleeding Lamb, crucified Christ, fulfill in us that which You said: "Anyone who follows me will not be walking in the dark, but will have the light of life" (Jn 8: 12). O perfect light, from whom all lights proceed! O light for whom light was created, without whom all is darkness and with whom all is light. Light up, light up, do light up! Let Your whole will penetrate all the authors and collaborators You have chosen in this work of renewal. Jesus, Jesus love, Jesus, transform us and make us conform to You. Uncreated Wisdom, Eternal Word, sweet Truth, silent Love, Jesus, Jesus Love!

(St. Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi, O. Carm., in The Renewal of the Church, 90-91.)

Contemplatio

Repeat frequently and calmly these words of Jesus when He offered himself:

"Father into Your hands I commend my spirit"

Saturday, March 30, 2024

Holy Saturday – No Services

Sunday, March 31, 2024

Easter Sunday of the Resurrection

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit

Lord Jesus Christ, today Your light shines in us, source of life and joy. Send the Spirit of love and truth, so that, like Mary Magdalene, Peter and John, we too may discover and interpret in the light of the Word, the signs of Your divine presence in our world. May we welcome these signs in faith that we may always live in the joy of Your presence among us, even when all seems to be shrouded in the darkness of sadness and evil.

The Gospel Reading – John 20: 1-9

A Key to the Reading:

For John the Evangelist, the resurrection of Jesus is the decisive moment in the process of His glorification, inextricably linked with the first phase of this glorification, His passion and death.

The event of the resurrection is not described in the spectacular and apocalyptic details of the synoptic Gospels. For John, the life of the Risen One asserts itself silently, in the discreet and irresistible power of the Spirit.

The state of the faith of the disciples is announced, "While it was still dark" and begins through the vision of the material signs that recall the Word of God. Jesus is the great protagonist of the story, but He does not appear personally.

The Text:

On the first day of the week, Mary of Magdala came to the tomb early in the morning, while it was still dark, and saw the stone removed from the tomb. So, she ran and went to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and told them, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they put him." So, Peter and the other disciple went out and came to the tomb. They both ran, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and arrived at the tomb first; he bent down and saw the burial cloths there, but did not go in. When Simon Peter arrived after him, he went into the tomb and saw the burial cloths there, and the cloth that had covered his head, not with the burial cloths but rolled up in a separate place. Then the other disciple also went in, the one who had arrived at the tomb first, and he saw and believed. For they did not yet understand the Scripture that he had to rise from the dead.

A Subdivision of the Text for a Better Understanding:

- Verse 1: introduction and events prior to the situation;
- Verse 2: Mary's reaction and the first announcement of the newly discovered fact;
- Verses 3-5: the immediate reaction of the disciples and the interaction among them.
- Verses 6-7: verification of the event announced by Mary;
- Verses 8-9: the faith of the other disciple and its relationship to the Sacred Scriptures.

A Moment of Interior and Exterior Silence

to open our hearts and make room within for the Word of God:

- A slow re-reading of the whole passage;
- I too am in the garden: the empty sepulchre is before my eyes;
- I allow Mary Magdalene's words to echo within me
- I too run with her, Peter and the other disciple;
- I allow myself to be immersed in the joyful wonder of faith in Jesus Christ, even though, like them, I do not see Him with my bodily eyes.

The Gift of the Word to Us

- *Chapter 20 in John:* This is quite a fragmented text where it is clear that the editor has intervened several times to put the stress on some themes and to unify the various texts received previously from (at least three) preceding sources.
- *The day after the Sabbath:* it is "the first day of the week" and, in Christian circles, inherits the sacredness of the Jewish Sabbath. For Christians it is the first day of the new week, the beginning of the new time, the memorial day of the resurrection called "the day of the Lord" (*dies Domini*).

Here and in verse 19, the Evangelist adopts an expression that is already traditional for Christians (e.g.: *Mk 16:2, 9; Acts 20:7*) and is older than the expression that later became characteristic of the first evangelisation: "the third day" (e.g.: *Lk 24:7, 46; Acts 10:40, 1Cor 15:4*).

- *Mary Magdalene:* This is the same woman as the one present at the foot of the cross with other women (19: 25). Here she seems to be alone, but the words in verse 2 ("*we do not know*") show that the original story, worked on by the Evangelist, told of more women, as is true of the other Gospels (cf. *Mk 16:1-3; Mt 28:1; Lk 23:55-24:1*).

However, the synoptics (cf. *Mk 16: 1; Lk 24: 1*), do not specify the reason for her visit to the sepulchre, seeing that it implied that the rite of burial had already been carried out (19:40); perhaps, the only thing missing is the funereal lamentation (cf. *Mk 5:38*). In any case, the fourth Evangelist reduces to a minimum the story of the discovery of the empty sepulchre so as to focus the attention of the reader on what comes after.

- *Early, while it was still dark:* Mark (16:2) says something different, but from both we understand that it was the very early hours of the morning, when the light is very weak and still pale. Perhaps John stresses the lack of light in order to contrast symbolically the *darkness* - lack of faith and *light* - welcoming of the Gospel, of the resurrection.
- *The stone had been taken away from the tomb:* the Greek work is generic: the stone had been "taken away" or "removed" (different from: *Mk 16: 3-4*).

The verb to "take away" recalls *Jn 1: 29*: the Baptist points Jesus out as "Lamb who takes away the sin of the world." Perhaps the Evangelist wishes to recall the fact that this stone, "taken away," flung away from the sepulcher, is the material sign that death and sin have been "taken away" by the resurrection of Jesus?

- *So she ran and went to Peter and the other disciple:* Mary Magdalene runs to those who share her love for Jesus and her suffering for His atrocious death, now made worse by this new discovery. She turns to them, perhaps because they were the only ones who had not run away with the others and remained in contact with each other (cf. 19: 15, 26 - 27). She wants to share at least with them this final pain of the outrage committed against His body.

We see how Peter and the "beloved disciple" and Mary Magdalene are characterized by a special love that unites them with Jesus: it is indeed reciprocal love that makes them capable of sensing the presence of the loved person.

- *The other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved:* is someone who appears only in this Gospel and only beginning with chapter 13, when he exhibits great intimacy with Jesus and deep understanding with Peter (13: 23-25). He appears at every decisive moment of the passion and of the resurrection of Jesus but remains anonymous and many theories have been advanced on his identity. He is probably the anonymous

disciple of the Baptist who follows Jesus together with Andrew (1: 35, 40). Since the fourth Gospel never speaks of John the apostle and keeping in mind that this Gospel recounts details clearly known to an eyewitness, the "disciple" has been identified with John the apostle. The fourth Gospel has always been attributed to him even though he may not have materially written it, yet the origin of this particular tradition is that this Gospel and other writings are attributed to John. This also explains why he is someone who is somewhat idealized, *"The one whom Jesus loved."* It is clear that this is an addition, not from the apostle, who would not have dared boast of having such a close relationship with the Lord, but from His disciples who wrote most of the Gospel and who coined this expression after reflection on the clearly privileged love between Jesus and him (cf. 13: 25; 21: 4, 7). Where we read the simpler expression "the other disciple" or "the disciple," obviously the editors did not make the same addition.

They have taken the Lord out of the tomb: these words, which recur in verses 13 and 15, show that Mary was afraid that body-snatchers had taken the body, a thing common then, so much so that the Roman Emperor had to promulgate severe decrees to check this phenomenon. In Matthew (28: 11-15), the chief priests use this possibility to discredit the resurrection of Jesus and, eventually, to justify the lack of intervention on the part of the soldiers who guarded the tomb.

- *The Lord:* the title "Lord" implies an acknowledgement of divinity and evokes divine omnipotence. That is why this term was used by Christians for the risen Jesus. Indeed, the fourth Evangelist uses this term only in Paschal stories (see also 20: 13).
- *We do not know where they have laid Him:* these words recall what happened to Moses, whose place of burial was unknown (Deut 34: 10). Another implicit reference is to the words of Jesus Himself when He says that it is impossible to know where He is going (7: 11, 22; 8: 14, 28, 42; 13: 33; 14: 1-5; 16: 5).
- *They both ran, but the other disciple outran Peter...but he did not go in:* This passage shows the anxiety that these disciples were living through. The fact that the "other disciple" stopped is more than just a gesture of politeness or respect towards someone older; it is the tacit acknowledgement that Peter, within the apostolic group, held a place of pre-eminence, even though this is not stressed. It is, therefore, a sign of communion. This gesture could also be a literary device to move from the event in terms of faith in the resurrection to the following and peak moment in the story.

It is also possible that it shows hesitation or fear. As their faith was under strain at this moment, there may have been a hesitation when confronted with confirming the situation one way or the other. Would there be something to further chip at his faith or not? It could be a confirmation of what they had hoped, or nothing at all.

- *The linen cloths lying and the napkin...rolled up in a place by itself:* although the other disciple did not go in, he had already seen something. Peter, crossing the entrance of the sepulchre, discovers the proof that no theft of the body took place: no thief would have wasted time to unfold the body, spread the cloths in an orderly fashion (*on the ground* would be translated better by "spread out" or "laid carefully on the floor") and then to roll up the napkin in a place by itself. Such an operation would have been complicated also because the oils with which the body had been anointed (especially myrrh) acted like glue, causing the cloths to stick perfectly and solidly to the body, almost as what happened to mummies. Besides, the napkin is folded; the Greek verb can also mean "rolled," or it could indicate that that piece of light cloth had, in large part, preserved the form of the face over which it had been

placed, almost like a mortuary mask. The cloths are the same as those cited in Jn 19: 40.

Everything is in order in the sepulchre, even though the body of Jesus is not there, and Peter was well able to see inside the sepulchre because the day was breaking. Different from Lazarus (11: 44), then, Christ rises, abandoning completely His funerary trappings. Ancient commentators note that, in fact, Lazarus had to use the cloths again for his definitive burial, while Christ had no further use of them because He was not to die again (cf. *Rm* 6: 9).

- *Peter...saw...the other disciple...saw and believed:* at the beginning of the story, Mary Magdalene also "saw." Although some translations use the same verb, the original text uses three different verbs (*theorein* for Peter; *blepein* for the other disciple and Mary Magdalene; *idein*, here, for the other disciple), allowing us to understand that there is a growth in the spiritual depth of this "seeing" that, in fact, culminates in the faith of the other disciple.

The anonymous disciple had certainly not seen anything other than what Peter had observed. Perhaps he interprets what he sees differently from others because of the special relationship of love he had with Jesus (Thomas' experience is emblematic, 29: 24-29). In any case, as indicated by the tense of the Greek verb, his is still an initial faith, so much so that he cannot find ways of sharing this experience with Mary Magdalene or Peter or any of the other disciples (there is no further reference to this).

However, for the fourth Evangelist the double "see and believe" is quite meaningful and refers exclusively to faith in the resurrection of the (cf. 20: 29), because it was impossible to believe truly before the Lord had died and risen (cf. 14: 25-26; 16: 12-15). The double vision-faith, then, characterizes the whole of this chapter, and "the beloved disciple" is presented as a model of faith who succeeds in understanding the truth about God through material (cf. also 21: 7).

- *As yet they did not know the Scripture:* this obviously refers to all the other disciples. Even for those who had lived close to Jesus, it was difficult to believe in Him. For them, as for us as well, the only gateway that allows us to cross the threshold of authentic faith is knowledge of the Scriptures (cf. *Lk* 24: 26-27; *1Cor* 15: 34; *Acts* 2 :27-31) in the light of the events of the resurrection.

Questions to Direct Our Reflection and Its Practice

- What, in the concrete, does it mean for us "to believe in Jesus the Risen One"? What difficulties do we encounter? Does the resurrection solely concern Jesus or is it really the foundation of our faith?
- The relationship that we see between Peter, the other disciple and Mary Magdalene is clearly one of great communion in Jesus. In what persons, realities, or institutions do we today find this same understanding of love and the same "common union" founded on Jesus? Where can we read the concrete signs of the great love for the Lord and "His own" that inspired all the disciples?
- We see three levels of growth in faith here: Mary, who sees but does not go deeper and instead asks for help to learn more, the other disciple, who is energetic and enthusiastic, yet stops short of totally being immersed in the truth, and Peter, who goes in entirely, to be fully involved in the truth within. These can represent different levels in the growth of one's faith as well. Where am I in this and who best represents my approach to being fully involved in the Lord?

Let Us Pray Asking for Grace and Praising God

A Hymn Taken from the Letter of Paul to the Ephesians (paraphrase of 1: 17-23).

The God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which He has called you, what are the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of His power in us who believe, according to the working of His great might which He accomplished in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and made Him sit at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come; and He has put all things under His feet and has made Him the head over all things for the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

Closing Prayer

The liturgical context is of great importance in praying this Gospel and the event of the resurrection of Jesus, which is the hub of our faith and of our Christian life. The sequence that characterizes the Eucharistic liturgy of today and of the whole week leads us to praise the Father and the Lord Jesus.

*Christians, to the Paschal Victim
Offer sacrifice and praise.
The sheep are ransomed by the Lamb;
and Christ, the undefiled
has sinners to His Father reconciled.
Death with life contended:
Combat strangely ended!
Life's own Champion, slain,
Yet lives to reign.
Tell us Mary:
say what you see upon the way.
The tomb the living did enclose;
I saw Christ's glory as He rose!
The angels there attesting;
Shroud with grave-clothes resting.
Christ, my hope, has risen:
He goes before you into Galilee.
That Christ is truly risen from the dead
we know.
Victorious king,
your mercy show.*

We may conclude our prayer also with this lively invocation by a contemporary poet, Marco Guzzi:

*Love, Love, Love!
I wish to feel, live and express all this Love,
Which is a joyful commitment in the world
and a happy contact with the others.
Only You free me, only You release me.*

*And the snows fall to water
the greenest of valleys in creation.*