



Lectio Divina

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Wednesday, March 1, 2023

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Forgiving, merciful God,
we pray you for a good measure of humility and honesty to acknowledge before you and people that we are weak and fallible men and women, who often try to turn a blind eye to our shortcomings and our sins.

Strong with the grace won in the hard way by your Son on the cross, we beg you for the courage to seek your forgiveness and to turn and return wholeheartedly to you and to serve you and people.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Luke 11: 29-32

The crowds got even bigger, and he addressed them, 'This is an evil generation; it is asking for a sign. The only sign it will be given is the sign of Jonah. For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of man be a sign to this generation.

On Judgement Day the Queen of the South will stand up against the people of this generation and be their condemnation, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and, look, there is something greater than Solomon here.

On Judgement Day the men of Nineveh will appear against this generation and be its condemnation, because when Jonah preached they repented; and, look, there is something greater than Jonah here.

Reflection

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

- Luke 11, 29: The evil generation which asks for a sign. Jesus calls the generation evil, because it does not want to believe in Jesus and continues to ask for signs which can indicate that Jesus has been sent by the Father. But Jesus refuses to present these signs, because definitively, if they ask for a sign it is because they do not believe. The only sign which will be given is that of Jonah.
- Luke 11, 30: The sign of Jonah. The sign of Jonah has two different aspects. The first one is what the text of Luke affirms in today's Gospel. Jonah was a sign, through his preaching, for the people of Nineveh. Listening to Jonah, the people were converted. In the same way, the preaching of Jesus was a sign for his people, but the people did not show any sign of conversion

The other aspect is that which the Gospel of Matthew affirms when he quotes the same episode: "For as Jonah remained in the belly of the sea-monster for three days and three nights, so will the Son of man be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights" (Mt 12, 40). When the fish vomited Jonah into the dry land, he went

to announce the Word of God to the people of Nineveh. Thus, in the same way, after the death and resurrection on the third day, the Good News will be announced to the people of Judah.

- Luke 11, 31: The Queen of the South. Following this Jesus recalls the story of the Queen of the South, who came from the ends of the earth to meet Solomon, and to learn from his wisdom (cfr. I Kg 10, 1-10). And twice Jesus affirms: "And, look, there is something greater than Solomon here." "And, look, there is something much greater than Jonah here."
- A very important aspect which is subjacent in the discussion between Jesus and the leaders of his People is the diverse way in which Jesus and his enemies place themselves before God. The Book of Jonah is a parable, which criticizes the mentality of those who wanted God only for the Jews. In the story of Jonah, the pagans were converted listening to the preaching of Jonah and God accepts them in his goodness and does not destroy the city. When Jonah sees that God accepts the people of Nineveh and does not destroy the city "Jonah became very indignant, he fell into a rage. He prayed to the Lord : 'Lord, please is not this what I said would happen when I was still in my own country? That was why I first tried to flee to Tarshish, since I knew you were a tender, compassionate God, slow to anger, rich in faithful love, who relents about inflicting disaster. So now, Lord, please take my life, for I might as well be dead as go on living!'" (Jon 4, 1-3). For this reason, Jonah was a sign for the Jews of the time of Jesus and it continues to be for us Christians. Then, in an imperceptible way, like Jonah, in us there is also the mentality according to which we Christians would have a certain monopoly on God and all others should become Christians. This would be proselytism. Jesus does not ask that all become Christians. He wants for all to be disciples (Mt 28, 19), that is, that they be persons who, like him, radiate and announce the Good News of the love of God for all peoples (Mk 16, 15).

Personal Questions

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

Concluding Prayer

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

Thursday, March 2, 2023

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord, our God,
you are a generous Father,
who give us what is good for us simply because you love us.

Gives us grateful hearts, Lord, that we may learn from you
to give and share without calculation but simply with love and joy,
as Jesus, your Son, did among us,
who lives with you and with us forever.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 7: 7-12

Jesus said to his disciples: 'Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. Everyone who asks receives; everyone who searches finds; everyone who knocks will have the door opened.

Is there anyone among you who would hand his son a stone when he asked for bread? Or would hand him a snake when he asked for a fish?

If you, then, evil as you are, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

'So always treat others as you would like them to treat you; that is the Law and the Prophets.

Reflection

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

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

- Mathew 7, 9-11: The question of Jesus to the people. "Is there anyone among you who would hand his son a stone when he asked for bread? Or would hand him a snake when he asked for a fish?" Here appears the simple and direct way which Jesus has for teaching the people the things of God to the people. Speaking to the parents, He connects himself to the daily experience. Between the lines of the question one can guess the response the people yelled out: "No!" because nobody gives a stone to a son who asks for bread. There is no father and no mother who would give a snake to the son when he asks for a fish. And Jesus draws the conclusion: "If you, then, evil as you are, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" Jesus calls us evil to stress the certainty of being listened to by God when we ask Him for something. And this, because if we who are not saints, know how to give good things to our children, how much more the Father in heaven. This comparison has as its objective to take away from our heart any doubt concerning the prayer addressed to God with trust. God will listen! Luke adds that God will give the Holy Spirit (Lk 11, 13).
- Mathew 7, 12: The Golden Rule. "So always treat others as you would like them to treat you; that is the Law and the Prophets." This is the summary of all the Old Testament, of the Law and the Prophets. And this is the summary of everything which God wants to tell us, the summary of all the teaching of Jesus. This Golden Rule is not found only in the teaching of Jesus, but also, in one way or other, in all religions. This responds to the most profound and more universal sentiment of the human being.

Personal Questions

- Ask, seek, knock on the door: How do you pray and speak with God?
- How do you live the Golden Rule?

Concluding Prayer

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

You heard me on the day when I called,
and you gave new strength to my heart. (Ps 138, 2-3)

Friday, March 3, 2023

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

God of mercy and compassion, you challenge us to be responsible for the good and the evil we do and you call us to conversion.

God, help us to face ourselves
that we may not use flimsy excuses for covering up our wrongs.

Make us honest with ourselves,
and aware that we can always count on Jesus Christ to be our guide and strength on the road to you, now and for ever.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 5, 20-26

'For I tell you, if your uprightness does not surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of Heaven.

'You have heard how it was said to our ancestors, You shall not kill; and if anyone does kill he must answer for it before the court. But I say this to you, anyone who is angry with a brother will answer for it before the court; anyone who calls a brother "Fool" will answer for it before the Sanhedrin; and anyone who calls him "Traitor" will answer for it in hell fire.

So then, if you are bringing your offering to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, go and be reconciled with your brother first, and then come back and present your offering.

Come to terms with your opponent in good time while you are still on the way to the court with him, or he may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the officer, and you will be thrown into prison. In truth I tell you, you will not get out till you have paid the last penny.

Reflection

The text of today's Gospel forms part of a broader or more extensive whole: Mt 5, 20 up to Mt 5, 48. In these passages Matthew tells us how Jesus interprets and explains the Law of God. Five times he repeats the phrase: "You have heard how it was said to our ancestors, in truth I tell you!" (Mt 5, 21. 27. 33.38. 43). Before, he had said: "Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; no, I have come not to abolish, but to complete them" (Mt 5, 17). The attitude of Jesus before the Law is, at the same time, one of breaking and of continuity. He breaks away from the erroneous interpretations but maintains firm the objective which the Law should attain: the practice of a greater justice, which is Love.

- Matthew 5, 20: An uprightness which surpasses that of the Pharisees. This first verse presents the general key of everything which follows in Matthew 5, 20-48. The word Justice never appears in the Gospel of Mark, and it appears seven times in that of Matthew (Mt 3, 15; 5, 6.10.20; 6, 1.33; 21, 32). This has something to do with the situation of the communities for which Mark wrote. The religious ideal of the Jews of the time was "to be just before God." The Pharisees taught: "Persons attain justice before God when they succeed to observe all the norms of the law in all its details!" This teaching generated a legalistic oppression and caused great anguish in persons, because it was very difficult to be able to observe all the norms (cfr. Rm 7, 21-24). This is why Matthew takes the words of Jesus on justice to show that it has to surpass the justice of the Pharisees (Mt, 5, 20). According to Jesus, justice does not come from what I do for God observing the law, but rather from what God does for me, accepting me as his son, as his daughter. The new ideal which Jesus proposes is the following: "Therefore, be perfect as perfect is your Heavenly Father!" (Mt 5, 48). That means: You will be just before God when you try to accept and forgive persons as God accepts and pardons me, in spite of my defects and sins. By means of these five very concrete examples, Jesus shows us what to do in order to attain this greater justice which surpasses the justice of the Scribes and the Pharisees. As we can see, today's Gospel takes the example of the new interpretation of the fifth commandment: You shall not kill! Jesus has revealed what God wanted when he gave this commandment to Moses.
- Matthew 5, 21-22: The law says: "You shall not kill!" (Ex 20, 13). In order to observe fully this commandment it is not sufficient to avoid murdering. It is necessary to uproot

from within everything which, in one way or another, can lead to murder, for example, anger, hatred, the desire to revenge, insult, and exploitation, etc.

- Matthew 5, 23-24. The perfect worship which God wants. In order to be accepted by God and to remain united to him, it is necessary to reconcile oneself with the brother, the sister. Before the destruction of the Temple, in the year 70, when the Christian Jews participated in the pilgrimages in Jerusalem to present their offerings at the altar and to pay their promises, they always remembered this phrase of Jesus. In the year 80, at the time when Matthew wrote, the Temple and the Altar no longer existed. They had been destroyed by the Romans. The community and the communitarian celebration became the Temple and the Altar of God.
- Matthew 5, 25-26: To reconcile oneself. One of the points on which the Gospel of Matthew exists the most is reconciliation. That indicates that in the communities of that time, there were many tensions among the radical groups with diverse tendencies and sometimes even opposed ones. Nobody wanted to cede before the other. There was no dialogue. Matthew enlightens this situation with the words of Jesus on reconciliation which request acceptance and understanding. Because the only sin that God does not forgive is our lack of pardon toward others (Mt 6, 14). That is why, try to reconcile yourself before it is too late!

Personal Questions

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

Concluding Prayer

From the depths I call to you, Yahweh: Lord, hear my cry.
Listen attentively to the sound of my pleading! (Ps 130,1-2)

Saturday, March 4, 2023

Lent Time

Opening Prayer

Lord God, from you comes the initiative of love. You seek us out and you tell us: "I am your God; you are my people." You love us in Jesus Christ, your Son. God, may our response of love go far beyond the demands of any law. May we seek you and commune with you in the deepest of our being and may we express our gratitude to you by going to our neighbor with a love that is spontaneous like yours. We ask you this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 5, 43-48

'You have heard how it was said, You will love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say this to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; so that you may

be children of your Father in heaven, for he causes his sun to rise on the bad as well as the good, and sends down rain to fall on the upright and the wicked alike.

For if you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Do not even the tax collectors do as much? And if you save your greetings for your brothers, are you doing anything exceptional?

Do not even the gentiles do as much? You must therefore be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.'

Reflection

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

- Love your enemies. In today's Gospel Jesus quotes the ancient law which says: "You will love your neighbor and hate your enemy." This text is not found like this in the Old Testament. It is rather a question of the mentality of the time, according to which there was no problem in the fact that a person hated his enemy. Jesus was not in agreement and says: "But I tell you: For if you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Do not even the tax collectors do as much? And if you save your greetings for your brothers, are you doing anything exceptional? Do not even the gentiles do as much? You must, therefore, set no bounds to your love, just as your heavenly Father sets none to his." And Jesus gives us the proof. At the hour of his death, he observed that which he preached.
- Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing. A soldier takes the wrist of Jesus and places it on the arm of the cross, places a nail and begins to hammer it in. Several times. The blood was flowing down. The body of Jesus contorted with pain. The soldier, a mercenary, ignorant, far from knowing what he was doing, and of what was happening around him, continued to hammer as if it were a piece of the wall of his house and had to put up a picture. At that moment Jesus prays for the soldier who tortures him and addresses his prayer to the Father: "Father, forgive them! They know not what they are doing!" He loved the soldier who killed him. Even wanting it with all their strength, the lack of humanity did not succeed to kill in Jesus, humanity and love! He will be imprisoned, they will spit on him, will laugh and make fun of him, they will make of him a false king crowning him with a crown of thorns, will torture him, will oblige him to go through the streets like a criminal, hearing the insults of the religious authority, on Calvary they will leave him completely naked in the sight of all. But the poison of the lack of humanity did not succeed to attain the source of love and of humanity which sprang from within Jesus. The water of the love which sprang from within was stronger than the poison of hatred which was coming from without. Looking at that soldier, Jesus felt sorrow and prayed for him and for all: "Father, forgive them! They know not what they are doing!" Jesus, in solidarity, almost excuses those who were ill treating and torturing him. He was like a brother who goes with his murder brothers before the Judge and, he the victim of his own brothers, says to the judge: "They are my brothers, you know they are ignorant. Forgive them! They will become better!" He loved the enemy!

- Be perfect as perfect is your Father who is in Heaven. Jesus does not simply want to frighten, because this would be useless. He wants to change the system of human living together. The Novelty which he wants to construct comes from the new experience which he has from God, the Father, full of tenderness who accepts all! The words of threat against the rich cannot be an occasion of revenge on the part of the poor. Jesus orders that we have the contrary attitude: "Love your enemies!" True love cannot depend on what one receives from others. Love should want the good of others independently of what they does for me. Because this is the way God's love is for us.

Personal Questions

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

Concluding Prayer

How blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the Law of Yahweh!
Blessed are those who observe his instructions, who seek him with all their hearts (Ps 119,1-2)

Sunday, March 5, 2023

Second Sunday of Lent

Initial Prayer:

Oh God, who in the glorious Transfiguration of Christ, the Lord, you confirmed the mysteries of faith by the witness of the Law and of the prophets and you have admirably pre-announced our definite adoption as your children, may we listen to the Word of your Beloved Son to become coheirs of his immortal life.

Reading of the Gospel – Mt 17:1-9

1 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain by themselves. 2 There in their presence he was transfigured: his face shone like the sun and his clothes became as dazzling as light. 3 And suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared to them; they were talking with him. 4 Then Peter spoke to Jesus. 'Lord,' he said, 'it is wonderful for us to be here; if you want me to, I will make three shelters here, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.' 5 He was still speaking when suddenly a bright cloud covered them with shadow, and suddenly from the cloud there came a voice which said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; he enjoys my favor. Listen to him.' 6 When they heard this, the disciples fell on their faces, overcome with fear. 7 But Jesus came up and touched them, saying, 'Stand up, do not be afraid.' 8 And when they raised their eyes they saw no one but Jesus. 9 As they came down from the mountain Jesus gave them this order, 'Tell no one about this vision until the Son of man has risen from the dead.'

Moments of Silence:

So that God's Word may enter in us and enlighten our life.

MEDITATIO

Key for the Reading:

The Gospel according to Matthew insists on the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. This is why Matthew's Gospel is the Gospel of the Church, that is of the People of God guided by its Head and Master Jesus, the Christ. The text which narrates the event of the Transfiguration forms part of a section of the Gospel in which, the Evangelist develops the theme of the beginning of the coming of the Kingdom in a group of disciples who gradually will constitute the Body of the Church. We find the account of the Transfiguration in all the Synoptic Gospels (Mk 9, 2-8; Lk 9, 28-36), and we also find a reference to this event in the second letter of Peter (2 Pt 1, 16-18). The text of Matthew (17, 1-9) though presents some diversity. The account is found immediately after the first announcement of the Passion and the mentioning of the conditions necessary for the following of Christ and also the event of the glorification of the Son of Man in the glory of the Father (Mt 16, 21-28). Before the glorification, Jesus has to go to Jerusalem for the fulfillment of the Pascal mystery, that is: Passion, Death and Resurrection (Mt 16, 21). Those who desire and wish to follow Jesus have to deny themselves and then, also carry their cross to follow the Master. (Mt 16, 24). Only in this way can we participate in his glory: "Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt 16, 25). Those who do not accept the event of the Cross in the life of Christ and therefore in the program of following him, are considered by Jesus as "Satan", because they do not think "according to God but as human beings do" (Mt 16, 23). The expression which Jesus addresses to Peter: "Get behind me, Satan!" (Mt 16, 23) reminds us of a similar expression used by Jesus in the parable of the final judgment "When the Son of man comes in his glory", (Mt 25, 31-46): "Go away from me, with your curse upon you, to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Mt 25, 41). This curse is addressed to those who do not know the Lord and thus they do not form part of his Kingdom.

Then follows the account of the Transfiguration (Mt 17, 1-9) with the question on the coming of Elijah and the healing of the epileptic demoniac (Mt 17, 10-21). After these events Jesus, for the second time, announces his Passion (Mt 17, 22) and concerning the question of the payment of taxes for the needs of the temple, Jesus plays on the words regarding the reality of son-ship (Mt 17, 24-27). In the Transfiguration the Father declares that Jesus is "My Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him" (Mt 17, 5). We are also sons, in him, of the same Father (Mt 5, 45; Mt 17 25-26).

Jesus then presents himself as our guide on the journey towards the Kingdom. In the account of the Transfiguration Jesus is presented as the new Moses who encounters God "on a high mountain" (Mt 17, 1) in the "bright cloud" (Mt 17, 5), with his face shining (Mt 17, 2). Moses also encounters God in the cloud on Mount Sinai (Ex 24, 15-18) with the bright face (Ex 34, 29-35). Elijah also encounters the Lord on Mount Horeb, the mountain of God (1 K 19, 9-13). Just as in the event of Sinai (Ex 19, 20; 33-34), here also in the Transfiguration there is the revelation of the new law. To listen to the Beloved Son in whom God the Father is pleased (Mt 17, 5). This new law, given by God on Tabor by means of the new Moses, reminds us what the Patriarch says in the Book of Deuteronomy: "Yahweh, your God will raise up a prophet like me; you will listen to him" (Dt 18, 15). In this text of the Transfiguration, more important than the law, of which Jesus is the fulfillment (that is why

after the vision the Apostles “saw no one, but Jesus alone” (Mt 17, 7), the revelation on the part of the Father is stressed who proclaims the divine filiation of Jesus Christ. Besides this proclamation in the Transfiguration, the identity of the Son is proclaimed two other times in the Gospel of Matthew: at the beginning and at the end. After the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, a voice from heaven says: “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am pleased” (Mt 3, 17); and when Jesus dies on the Cross, the centurion exclaims using words of revelation and of faith: “Truly this one was the Son of God!” (Mt 27, 54). Besides, in this proclamation, the Father reveals Jesus as the servant of the Lord, pre-announced by Isaiah: “Behold my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom my soul delights” (Is 42, 1).

The discovery of the identity of the Son, arouses in the three witnesses the fear of God, falling on their faces (Mt 17, 6). Already at the beginning of the Gospel, in the birth of Jesus, the Magi “Entering into the house saw the Child with his mother Mary, and falling to their knees, they did him homage” (Mt 2, 11). A similar reaction is also found in the Gospel of John, after the self-revelation of the Lord, in the account when Jesus was arrested in Gethsemane. Jesus says to them: I am he!” [...] As soon as he said, “I am he”, they moved back and fell on the ground” (Jn 18, 5-6). Also in the Book of Revelation, John “in ecstasy” (Rv 1, 10), saw “one similar to a son of man [...] his face like the sun shining with all its force” (Rv 1, 12-16), and because of all these visions he fell at his feet like dead (Rv 1, 17). The apostle in Rm 14: 11 and Ph 2:10 will proclaim that before the Lord, “in the name of Jesus every knee will bow before him in heaven, on earth and in the underworld; every tongue shall proclaim that Jesus Christ is the Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

This vision is strictly linked to the mystery of the Passover, it seems like an apparition of the Risen Jesus in all his glory, it is a pre-announcement of the future life. For this reason, “coming down from the mountain, Jesus ordered them: “Tell no one about this vision until the Son of man has risen from the dead” (Mt 17, 9).

To Orientate the Meditation and the Realization:

- Read once again the passage from the Gospel, and find in the Bible all the texts quoted in the key to the reading. Try to find other parallel texts which can help you to penetrate deeper into the text in the meditation.
- Some questions:
 - Have you ever asked yourself who the Person of Christ is? Your vision of the identity of Jesus corresponds to that proclaimed in the Transfiguration?
 - What meaning does the proclamation of Jesus as Son of God have in your life?
 - Jesus cannot be understood without the Pascal mystery of the Passion, Death and Resurrection. What sense does this mystery have for you? How do you live it daily?

ORATIO

Psalm 97:

I seek your face, oh Lord, show me your face. Yahweh is king!
Let earth rejoice, the many isles be glad! Cloud, black cloud enfolds him,
saving justice and judgement the foundations of his throne. I seek your face, oh Lord,
show me your face.

The mountains melt like wax, before the Lord of all the earth.
The heavens proclaim his saving justice, all nations see his glory.
For you are Yahweh,

Most High over all the earth, far transcending all gods. I seek your face, oh Lord, show me your face.

Concluding Prayer:

Let us rejoice, Beloved,
and let us go forth to behold ourselves in your beauty to the mountain and to the hill, to where the pure water flows, and further, deep into the thicket.
(John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, 36)

CONTEMPLATIO

“Let us go forth to behold ourselves in your beauty”

This means: Let us so act that by means of this loving activity we may attain to the vision of ourselves in your beauty in eternal life. That is: That I be so transformed in your beauty that we may be alike in beauty, and both behold ourselves in your beauty, possessing then your very beauty; this, in such a way that each looking at the other may see in the other their own beauty, since both are your beauty alone, I being absorbed in your beauty; hence, I shall see you in your beauty, and you will see me in your beauty, and I shall see myself in you in your beauty, and you will see yourself in me in your beauty; that I may resemble you in your beauty, and you resemble me in your beauty, and my beauty be your beauty and your beauty my beauty; wherefore I shall be you in your beauty, and you will be me in your beauty, because your very beauty will be my beauty; and thus we shall behold each other in your beauty. (John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, 36/5)

Monday, March 6, 2023

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 the road of obedience and loyalty.
God, we often hurt this friendship, we act as if we were not your sons and daughters. See the look of shame on our faces.
Forgive us, for we count on you.
Accept our thanks for continuing to take us as we are and loving us notwithstanding our sins. We ask you this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Luke 6, 36-38

'Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven.

Give, and there will be gifts for you: a full measure, pressed down, shaken together, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap; because the standard you use will be the standard used for you.'

Reflection

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

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

Personal Questions

- Lent is a time of conversion. Which is the conversion which today's Gospel is asking of me?
- Have you already been merciful as the Heavenly Father is?

Concluding Prayer

Help us, God our Saviour, for the glory of your name;
Yahweh, wipe away our sins,
rescue us for the sake of your name. (Ps 79,9)

Tuesday, March 7, 2023

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.
God, 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 for ever and ever.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 23, 1-12

Then addressing the crowds and his disciples Jesus said, 'The scribes and the Pharisees occupy the chair of Moses. You must therefore do and observe what they tell you; but do not be guided by what they do, since they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people's shoulders, but will they lift a finger to move them? Not they! Everything they do is done to attract attention, like wearing broader headbands and longer tassels, like wanting to take the place of honor at banquets and the front seats in the synagogues, being greeted respectfully in the market squares and having people call them Rabbi. 'You, however, must not allow yourselves to be called Rabbi, since you have only one Master, and you are all brothers. You must call no one on earth your father, since you have only one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor must you allow yourselves to be called teachers, for you have only one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you must be your servant. Anyone who raises himself up will be humbled, and anyone who humbles himself will be raised up.'

Reflection

Today's Gospel presents the criticism of Jesus against the Scribes and the Pharisees of his time. At the beginning of the missionary activity of Jesus, the Doctors of Jerusalem went to Galilee to observe him (Mk 3, 22; 7, 1). Disturbed by Jesus' preaching, they had based their calumny saying that he was possessed (Mk 3, 22). All along the three years the popularity of Jesus grew. And at the same time, the conflict between he and the religious authority also grew. The origin of this conflict was the way in which they placed themselves before God. The Pharisees sought their own security, not so much in God's love toward them, but rather in the rigorous observance of the Law. Before this mentality, Jesus insists on the practice of love which makes the observance of the law relative and gives it its true significance.

- Matthew 23, 1-3: The root or origin of the criticism: "They say but they do not do." Jesus recognizes the authority of the Scribes and of the Pharisees. They occupy the chair of Moses and teach the law of God, but they themselves do not observe what they teach. So Jesus tells them: "You must, therefore, do and observe what they tell you, but do not do as they do, because they say but do not do!" This is a terrible criticism! Immediately, like in a mirror, Jesus shows some aspects of the incoherence of the religious authority.
- Matthew 23, 4-7: Look in the mirror in order to make a revision of life. Jesus calls the attention of the disciples concerning the incoherent behaviour of some doctors of the Law. In meditating on this incoherence, it is convenient to think not in the

Pharisees and the Scribes of that time already past, but rather in ourselves and in our incoherence: they tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people's shoulders, but will not lift a finger to move them; they do their works in order to be admired; they love to take the first places and to be called doctors. The Scribes liked to enter the houses of the widows and to recite long prayers to receive money in exchange! (Mk 12, 40).

- Matthew 23, 8-10): You are all brothers. Jesus orders that we have the contrary attitude. Instead of using the religion and the community as means for self-promotion in order to appear as being more important before others, he asks not to use the title of Rabbi or Teacher, of Master, Father and Guide because only one is the Guide, Christ; only God in Heaven is Father, and Jesus is the Master, the Teacher. You are all brothers. This is the basis of the fraternity which comes from the certainty that God is our Father.
- Matthew 23, 11-12: The final summary: the greatest must be the servant. This phrase is what characterizes both the teaching and the behaviour of Jesus: "The greatest among you must be your servant; the one who raises himself up, will be humbled" (cfr. Mk 10, 43; Lk 14, 11; 18, 14).

Personal Questions

- In what does Jesus criticize the Doctors of the Law and in what does he praise them? In what would he criticize me and in what would he praise me?
- Have you already seen in the mirror?

Concluding Prayer

'Honor to me is a sacrifice of thanksgiving;
to the upright I will show God's salvation.' (Ps 50,23)

Wednesday, March 8, 2023

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,
your prophets remind us
in season and out of season
of our responsibilities toward you and toward the world of people. When they disturb and upset us, let it be a holy disturbance
that makes us restless, eager to do your will and to bring justice and love around us.
We ask you this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 20, 17-28

Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, and on the road he took the Twelve aside by themselves and said to them, 'Look, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of man is about to be handed over to the chief priests and scribes. They will condemn him to

death and will hand him over to the gentiles to be mocked and scourged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised up again.'

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came with her sons to make a request of him, and bowed low; and he said to her, 'What is it you want?' She said to him, 'Promise that these two sons of mine may sit one at your right hand and the other at your left in your kingdom.' Jesus answered, 'You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?' They replied, 'We can.' He said to them, 'Very well; you shall drink my cup, but as for seats at my right hand and my left, these are not mine to grant; they belong to those to whom they have been allotted by my Father.'

When the other ten heard this they were indignant with the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, 'You know that among the gentiles the rulers lord it over them, and great men make their authority felt. Among you this is not to happen. No; anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

Reflection

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

- Matthew 20, 17-19: The third announcement of the Passion. Going toward Jerusalem, Jesus walks in front of them. He knows that he is going to be killed. The Prophet Isaiah had already announced it (Is 50, 4-6; 53, 1-10). His death is not the fruit of a plan established in advance, but the consequence of the commitment taken concerning the mission received from the Father, to be at the side of the excluded of his time. This is why Jesus speaks to the disciples about the tortures and death that he will have to face in Jerusalem. The disciple should follow the Master, even if he has to suffer like he. The disciples are frightened and accompany him with fear. They do not understand what is happening (cfr. Lk 18, 34). Suffering did not correspond to the idea that they had of the Messiah (cfr. Mt 16, 21-23).
- Matthew 20, 20-21: The petition of the mother to obtain the first place for her sons. The disciples do not only not understand the importance and significance of the message of Jesus, but they continue with their own personal ambitions. When Jesus insists on service and the gift of oneself, they continue to ask for the first places in the Kingdom. The mother of James and John, taking her sons with her, gets close to Jesus. The two did not understand the proposal of Jesus. They were concerned only about their own interests. This is a sign that the dominating ideology of that time had profoundly penetrated in the mentality of the disciples. In spite of the fact of having lived with Jesus several years, they had not renewed their way of seeing things. They looked at Jesus as always, with the same look. They wanted a reward for the fact of following Jesus. The same tensions existed in the communities of the time of Matthew and they still exist today in our own communities.
- Matthew 20-22-23: Jesus' answer. Jesus reacts firmly: "You do not know what you are asking for!" And he asks if they are capable of drinking the chalice that he, Jesus, will drink and if they are ready to receive the baptism which he will receive. It is the chalice of suffering, the baptism of blood! Jesus wants to know if they, instead of the places of honour, accept to give their life up to death. Both answer: "We can!" It seems to be a response not given from within, because a few days later, they abandoned Jesus and left him alone at the hour of suffering (Mk 14, 50). They do not have a great critical knowledge, they do not perceive their personal reality. In what

concerns the first place, the place of honour, in the Kingdom at the side of Jesus, the one who grants this is the Father. What he, Jesus, has to offer, is the chalice and the baptism, suffering and the cross.

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

Personal Questions

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

Concluding Prayer

Draw me out of the net they have spread for me, for you are my refuge;
to your hands I commit my spirit,
by you have I been redeemed. God of truth. (Ps 31,4-5)

Thursday, March 9, 2023

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 16, 19-31

'There was a rich man who used to dress in purple and fine linen and feast magnificently every day. And at his gate there used to lie a poor man called Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to fill himself with what fell from the rich man's table. Even dogs came and licked his sores.

Now it happened that the poor man died and was carried away by the angels into Abraham's embrace. The rich man also died and was buried. 'In his torment in Hades he looked up and saw Abraham a long way off with Lazarus in his embrace. So he cried out, "Father Abraham, pity me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames." Abraham said, "My son, remember that during your life you had your fill of good things, just as Lazarus his fill of bad. Now he is being comforted here while you are in agony. But that is not all: between us and you a great gulf has been fixed, to prevent those who want to cross from our side to yours or from your side to ours." 'So he said, "Father, I beg you then to send Lazarus to my father's house, since I have five brothers, to give them warning so that they do not come to this place of torment too." Abraham said, "They have Moses and the prophets, let them listen to them." The rich man replied, "Ah no, father Abraham, but if someone comes to them from the dead, they will repent." Then Abraham said to him, "If they will not listen either to Moses or to the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone should rise from the dead."

Reflection

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

- Luke 16, 19-21: The situation of the rich man and the poor man. The two extremes of society. On the one side, aggressive richness, on the other the poor man without resources, without rights, covered with wounds, without anybody to accept him, to receive him, except the dogs which came to lick his wounds. What separates both of them is the closed door of the house of the rich man. On the part of the rich man, there is no acceptance nor pity concerning the problem of the poor man at his door. But the poor man has a name and the rich man does not. That is, the poor man has his name written in the book of life, not the rich one. The poor man's name is Lazarus. It means God helps. And through the poor man, God helps the rich man who could have a name in the book of life. But the rich man does not accept to be helped by the poor man, because he keeps his door closed. This beginning of the parable which describes the situation, is a faithful mirror of what was happening during the time of Jesus and the time of Luke. It is the mirror of everything which is happening today in the world!
- Luke 16, 22: The change which reveals the hidden truth. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels into Abraham's embrace. The rich man also died and was buried. In the parable the poor man dies before the rich one. This is an advertisement for the rich. Up to the time when the poor man is alive and is at the door, there is still the possibility of salvation for the rich man. But after the poor man

dies, the only instrument of salvation for the rich man also dies. Now, the poor man is in Abraham's embrace. The embrace of Abraham is the source of life, from where the People of God is born, Lazarus, the poor man, forms part of the People of Abraham, from which he was excluded, when he was before the door of the rich man. The rich man who believes that he is a son of Abraham does not go toward the embrace of Abraham! The introduction of the parable ends here. Now its significance begins to be revealed, through the three conversations between the rich man and Father Abraham.

- Luke 16, 23-26: The first conversation. In the parable, Jesus opens a window on the other side of life, the side of God. It is not a question of Heaven. It is a question of life which only faith generates and which the rich man who has no faith cannot perceive. It is only in the light of death that the ideology of the empire disintegrates and appears for him what the true value of life is. On the part of God, without the deceiving propaganda of the ideology, things change. The rich man sees Lazarus in the embrace of Abraham and asks to be helped in his suffering. The rich man discovers that Lazarus is his only possible benefactor. But now, it is too late! The rich man without a name is pious, because he recognizes Abraham and calls him Father Abraham responds and calls him son. In reality this word of Abraham is addressed to all the rich who are alive. In so far as they are alive, they have the possibility to become sons and daughters of Abraham, if they know how to open the door to Lazarus, the poor man, the only one who in God's name can help them. Salvation for the rich man does not consist in Lazarus giving him a drop of fresh water to refresh his tongue, but rather, that he, the rich man, open the closed door to the poor man so as fill the great abyss that exists.
- Luke 16, 27-29: The second conversation. The rich man insists: "Then, Father, I beg you to send Lazarus to my father's house, because I have five brothers!" The rich man does not want his brothers to end in the same place of suffering. Lazarus, the poor man, is the only true intermediary between God and the rich. He is the only one, because it is only to the poor that the rich have to return what they had and, thus, re-establish the justice which has been damaged! The rich man is worried for his brothers, but was never concerned about the poor! Abraham's response is clear: "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them!" They have the Bible! The rich man had the Bible. He knew it by heart. But he was never aware of the fact that the Bible had something to do with the poor. The key which the rich man has in order to be able to understand the Bible is the poor man sitting at his door!
- Luke 16, 30-31: The third conversation. "No, Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent!" The rich man recognizes that he is wrong, he has committed an error, because he speaks of repenting, something which he never heard during his life. He wants a miracle, a resurrection! But this type of resurrection does not exist. The only resurrection is that of Jesus. Jesus, risen from the dead comes to us in the person of the poor, of those who have no rights, of those who have no land, of those who have no food, of those who have no house, of those who have no health. In his final response, Abraham is clear and convincing, forceful: "If they will not listen either to Moses or to the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone should rise from the dead!" The conversation ends this way! This is the end of the parable!
- The key to understand the sense of the Bible is the poor Lazarus, sitting before the door! God presents himself in the person of the poor, sitting at our door, to help us cover the enormous abyss which the rich have created. Lazarus is also Jesus, the poor and servant Messiah, who was not accepted, but whose death changed all things radically. And everything changes in the light of the death of the poor. The

place of torment, of torture is the situation of the person without God. Even if the rich man thinks that he has religion and faith, in fact, he is not with God because he does not open the door to the poor, as Zacchaeus did. (Lk 19, 1-10).

Personal Questions

- How do we treat the poor? Do they have a name for us? In the attitude that I have before them, am I like Lazarus or like the rich man?
- When the poor enter in contact with us, do they perceive something different? Do they perceive the Good News? And I, to which side do I tend, toward the miracle or toward God's Word?

Concluding Prayer

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

Friday, March 10, 2023

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 to be lived.
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: 'Listen to another parable. There was a man, a landowner, who planted a vineyard; he fenced it round, dug a winepress in it and built a tower; then he leased it to tenants and went abroad. When vintage time drew near he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his servants, thrashed one, killed another and stoned a third. Next he sent some more servants, this time a larger number, and they dealt with 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 each other, "This is the heir. Come on, let us kill him and take over his inheritance." So they seized him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' They 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.'

Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures: The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this is the Lord's doing and we marvel at it? 'I tell you, then, that the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.'

When they heard his parables, the chief priests and the scribes realised he was speaking about them, but though they would have liked to arrest him they were afraid of the crowds, who looked on him as a prophet.

Reflection

The text of today's Gospel forms part of a whole which is more vast or extensive which includes Mathew 21, 23-40. The chief priests and the Elders had asked Jesus with which authority he did those things (Mt 21, 23). They considered themselves the patrons of everything and they did not want anybody to do things without their permission. The answer of Jesus is divided into three parts:

- 1) He, in turn, asks them a question because he wants to know from them 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.
- Mathew 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 asking 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. (4) 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 succeed to accumulate for themselves, throughout the centuries.
- Mathew 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 say the truth about himself, without being aware that he condemns 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).
- Mathew 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 speaks about them, but they do not convert. All the contrary! They keep to their own project to kill Jesus. They will reject "the

corner stone.” 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 two 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 took to the Temple the tithe and the other taxes and offerings to pay the promises made. 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. Many of them were rich merchants or landlords. From the religious point of view they were conservative. They did not accept the changes supported by the Pharisees, for example, faith in the resurrection and the existence of the angels.
- The Pharisees: Pharisee means: separated. They struggled in a way that through the perfect observance of the Law of purity, people would succeed in being pure, separated and saint 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 greatly extended 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

- Sometimes have you felt that you were controlled in an undue manner, at home, at work, in the Church? Which was your reaction? Was it the same as that of Jesus?
- If Jesus would return today and would tell us the same parable, how would I react?

Concluding Prayer

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

Saturday, March 11, 2023

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 the destiny of ourselves 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

The tax collectors and sinners, however, were all crowding round to listen to him, and the Pharisees and scribes complained saying, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So, he told them this parable:

'There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, "Father, let me have the share of the estate that will come to me." So the father divided the property between them. A few days later, the younger son got together everything he had and left for a distant country where he squandered his money on a life of debauchery.

'When he had spent it all, that country experienced a severe famine, and now he began to feel the pinch; so he hired himself out to one of the local inhabitants who put him on his farm to feed the pigs. And he would willingly have filled himself with the husks the pigs were eating but no one would let him have them. Then he came to his senses and said, "How many of my father's hired men have all the food they want and more, and here am I dying of hunger! I will leave this place and go to my father and say: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired men." So he left the place and went back to his father.

'While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him. Then his son said, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son." But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the calf we have been fattening, and kill it; we will celebrate by having a feast, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found." And they began to celebrate.

'Now the elder son was out in the fields, and on his way back, as he drew near the house, he could hear music and dancing. Calling one of the servants he asked what it was all about. The servant told him, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the calf we had been fattening because he has got him back safe and sound." He was angry then and refused to go in, and his father came out and began to urge him to come in; but he retorted to his father, "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 father said, "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." '

Reflection

Chapter 15 of Luke's Gospel is enclosed in the following information: "The tax collectors and sinners, were all crowding round to listen to him, and the Pharisees and Scribes complained saying: This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Lk 15, 1-3). Immediately 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 decision of the younger son. 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 both receive their 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 Pagans, 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. In this same way, the younger son leaves and goes to a distant country and squandered 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 youngest represented, the communities from Paganism. And today who is the youngest and who the less young?

- 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 slave 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, fulfils the law of servants. The younger son wants to fulfil the law as the Pharisees and the Scribes of the time of Jesus wanted (Lk 15, 1). The missionaries of the Pharisees accused the Pagans who were converted to the God of Abraham (Mt 23, 15). At the time of Luke, some Christians who came from Judaism, submitted themselves to the yoke of the Law (Ga 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 sees him, and runs to the boy, clasps 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, what he was saying. Nobody listens! The Father does not want his son to be his slave. He wants him to be his son! This is the great 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. Closing up in himself, he thinks he has his own 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 a great intimacy with the Father, in spite of the fact that they lived in the same House. In fact, if he would have had it, he would have remarked the sadness of the Father for the loss of his younger son and would have understood his joy when his son returned. Those who live very worried 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. Because the younger one had the courage to go back home to his Father, while the older one no longer wants to enter the house of the Father. He is not aware that the Father without him, will lose his joy. Because he, the older son, is also son as much as the younger one!

- Luke 15, 28a-30: The attitude of the Father and the response of the older son. The Father goes out of the house, and begs the older son to enter into the house. But he 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, and he does not even call brother his own brother, but rather "this your son", as if he were no longer his brother. And he, the older brother, speaks about prostitutes. It is his malice which makes him interpret the life of his younger brother in this way. How many times the older brother interprets badly the life of the younger brother. How many times, we Catholics interpret badly the life and the religion 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 final response of the Father. In the same way, 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 and 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!" Is it that the older son was really aware that he was always with his Father and to find in his presence the reason for his joy? The expression of the Father: "All I have is yours!" includes also 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 son of the Father, he has to accept him as he is and not as he would like the Father to be! The parable does not say which was the final response of the older brother. It is up to the older son, whom we are, to give it!
- The one who experiences the gratuitous and surprising irruption of the love of God in his life becomes joyful and wishes to communicate this joy to others. The salvation action of God is a source of joy: "Rejoice with me!" (Lk 15, 6.9). And from this experience of God's gratuitousness emerges the sense of feast and joy (Lk 15, 32). At the end of the parable, the Father asks to be happy and to celebrate, to feast. The joy is threatened by the older son, who does not want to enter. He thinks he has the right to joy only with his own friends and does not want to share the 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.

Personal Questions

- Which is the image of God that I have since my childhood? Has it changed during these past years? If it has changed, why?
- With which of the two sons do I identify myself: with the younger one or with the older one? Why?

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 12, 2023

Third Sunday of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, send your Spirit to help us read the Scriptures in the same way that you read them to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. With the light of the Word in the Bible, you helped them to discover the presence of God in the distressing events surrounding your condemnation to death. The cross, which seemed to put an end to all hope, was revealed to them as the source of life and resurrection.

Create in us the silence necessary to hear your voice in creation and in the Scriptures, in the events of daily life and in people, above all in the poor and the suffering. May your word give us direction, just as it did to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, so that we too will experience the power of your resurrection and bear witness to others that you are alive in our midst as the source of community, of justice and of peace. We ask this of you, Jesus, son of Mary, you who revealed the Father to us and sent us your Spirit. Amen.

Gospel Reading - John 4, 5-42

A Key for Unlocking the Text:

The text describes the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. It is a very human conversation, which shows how Jesus related to people and how he himself learned and became enriched in talking with others. While reading the text, try to be aware of what surprises you most about the attitude both of Jesus and the woman.

A Division of the Text to Assist a Careful Reading:

- Jn 4,5-6: Sets the scene in which the dialogue takes place
- Jn 4,7-26: Describes the dialogue between Jesus and the woman
 - 7-15: about water and thirst
 - 16-18: about the husband and family
 - 19-25: about religion and the place for adoration
- Jn 4,27-30: Describes the effect of the conversation on the woman
- Jn 4,31-38: Describes the effect of the conversation on Jesus
- Jn 4,39-42: Describes the effect on the mission of Jesus in Samaria

The Text:

- 5-6: So he came to a city of Samaria, called Sychar, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and so Jesus, wearied as he was with his journey, sat down beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.
- 7-15: There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would

have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep; where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, and his sons, and his cattle?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw."

- 16-18: Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband; this you said truly."
- 19-26: The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when he comes, he will show us all things." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."
- 27-30: Just then his disciples came. They marvelled that he was talking with a woman, but none said, "What do you wish?" or, "Why are you talking with her?" So the woman left her water jar, and went away into the city, and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" They went out of the city and were coming to him.
- 31-38: Meanwhile the disciples besought him, saying, "Rabbi, eat." But he said to them, "I have food to eat of which you do not know." So the disciples said to one another, "Has any one brought him food?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work. Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, then comes the harvest? I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see how the fields are already white for harvest. He who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour; others have laboured, and you have entered into their labor."
- 39-42: Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did." So, when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world."

A Moment of Silent Prayer

so that the Word of God can enter into us and light up our lives.

Some Questions

to help us in our meditation and prayer.

- What most attracted your attention in Jesus' attitude to the woman during the dialogue? What method did Jesus use to help the woman become aware of a deeper dimension to life?
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- What most attracted your attention about the attitude of the Samaritan woman during her conversation with Jesus? How did she influence Jesus?
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- Where in the Old Testament, is water associated with the gift of life and the gift of the Holy Spirit?
- How does Jesus' attitude during the conversation question me or touch something within me or correct me?
- The Samaritan woman led the discussion towards religion. If you could come across Jesus and talk to him, what would you like to talk about? Why?
- Do I adore God in spirit and in truth or do I find my security in rituals and regulations?

A Key to the Reading

for those who wish to go deeper.

The Symbolism of Water:

- Jesus uses the word water in two senses. The first sense is the material, normal sense of water that one drinks; the second is the symbolic sense as the source of life and the gift of the Spirit. Jesus uses a language that people can understand and, at the same time, awakes in them, the desire to go deeper and to discover a more profound meaning to life.
- The symbolic sense of water has its roots in the Old Testament, where it is frequently a symbol for the action of the Spirit of God in people. For example, Jeremiah compares running water to water in a cistern (Jer. 2,13). The more water is taken from a cistern, the less it has; the more water is taken from a stream of living water, the more it has. Other texts from the Old Testament: Is.12,3; 49,10; 55,1; Ez. 47, 1-3. Jesus knew the traditions of his people and he uses these in his conversation with the Samaritan woman. Suggesting the symbolic meaning of water, he suggests to her (and to the readers) various episodes and phrases from the Old Testament.

The Dialogue between Jesus and the Woman:

- Jesus meets the woman at the well, a traditional place for meetings and conversations (Gen 24,10-27;29,1-14). He starts off from his own very real need because he is thirsty. He does this in such a way that the woman feels needed and she serves him. Jesus makes himself needy in her regard. From his question, he makes it possible for the woman to become aware that he depends on her to give him something to drink. Jesus awakens in her the desire to help and to serve.
- The conversation between Jesus and the woman has two levels.
 - **The superficial level**, in the material sense of water that quenches someone's thirst, and in the normal sense of husband as the father of a family. At this level the conversation is tense and difficult and does not flow. The Samaritan woman has the upper hand. At the beginning, Jesus tries to meet her by

talking about daily chores (fetching water), but he does not succeed. Then he tries by talking about family (call your husband), and still there is no breakthrough. Finally the woman speaks about religion (the place of adoration). Jesus then gets through to her by the door she herself has opened.

- **The deeper level**, in the symbolic sense of water as the image of the new life brought by Jesus, and of the husband as the symbol of the union of God with the people. At this level, the conversation flows perfectly. After revealing that he himself is offering the water of new life, Jesus says, "Go and get your husband and then return." In the past, the Samaritans had five husbands, or five idols, attached to the five groups of people who were taken off by the King of Assyria (2 Kings 17, 30-31). The sixth husband, the one the woman had at present, was not truly her husband: "the one you have now is not your husband" (Jn. 4,18). What the people had did not respond to their deepest desire: union with God, as a husband who unites himself to his spouse (Is. 62,5; 54,5). The true husband, the seventh, is Jesus, as promised by Hosea: "I will espouse you to me forever; I will espouse you in right and in justice, in love and in mercy. I will espouse you in fidelity, and you shall know the Lord." (Hos. 2, 21-22). Jesus is the bridegroom who has arrived (Mk. 2, 19) to bring new life to the woman who has been searching for it her whole life long, and until now, has never found it. If the people accept Jesus as "husband", they will have access to God wherever they are, both in spirit and in truth (vv. 23- 24).

* Jesus declares his thirst to the Samaritan woman but he does not drink. This is a sign that we are talking about a symbolic thirst, which had to do with his mission: the thirst to accomplish the will of his Father (Jn. 4, 34). This thirst is ever present in Jesus and will be until his death. At the moment of his death, he says, "I am thirsty" (Jn. 19, 28). He declares his thirst for the last time and so he can say, "It is accomplished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (Jn. 19,30). His mission had been accomplished.

The Importance of Women in the Gospel of John:

In John's Gospel, women feature prominently seven times, which are decisive for the spreading of the Good News. To women are given functions and missions, some of which, in the other Gospels, are attributed to men:

- At the wedding feast in Cana, the mother of Jesus recognizes the limits of the Old Testament and affirms the law of the Gospel, "Do whatever he tells you." (Jn. 2, 1-11).
- The Samaritan woman is the first person to have revealed to her by Jesus the great secret, that he is the Messiah. "It is I who speak to you." (Jn. 4,26). She then becomes the evangelizer of Samaria (Jn. 4, 28-30. 39-42).
- The woman, who is called an adulteress, at the moment of receiving the forgiveness of Jesus, becomes the judge of the patriarchal society (or of male power) that seeks to condemn her. (Jn. 8, 1-11).
- In the other Gospels it is Peter who makes the solemn profession of faith in Jesus (Mt. 16, 16; Mk. 8,29; Lk. 9,20). In the Gospel of John, it is Martha, sister of Mary and Lazarus, who makes the solemn profession of faith (Jn. 11,27).
- Mary, the sister of Martha, anoints the feet of Jesus for the day of his burial (Jn. 12,7). At the time of Jesus, the one who died on a cross was not buried nor embalmed. Mary anticipated the anointing of Jesus' body. This means that she accepted Jesus as the Messiah-Suffering Servant, who must die on the cross. Peter did not accept this (Jn.13,8) and sought to dissuade Jesus from this path (Mt. 16,22). In this way, Mary is presented as a model for the other disciples.

- At the foot of the cross, Jesus says, "Woman, behold your son; son, behold your mother" (Jn. 19,25-27). The Church is born at the foot of the cross. Mary is the model for the Christian community.
- Mary Magdalene must announce the Good News to the brothers (Jn. 20,11-18). She receives an order, without which all the other orders given to the apostles would have no effect or value.
- The Mother of Jesus appears twice in John's Gospel: at the beginning, at the wedding feast in Cana (Jn. 2, 1-5), and at the end, at the foot of the cross (Jn. 19, 25-27). In both cases, she represents the Old Testament that waits for the arrival of the New, and, in both cases, assists its arrival. Mary unites what has gone before with what would come later. At Cana, it is she, the Mother of Jesus, symbol of the Old Testament, who perceives its limits and takes steps so that the New will arrive. At the hour of Jesus' death, it is the Mother of Jesus, who welcomes the "Beloved Disciple." In this case the Beloved Disciple is the new community, which has grown around Jesus. It is the child that has been born from the Old Testament. In response to Jesus' request, the son, the New Testament, welcomes the Mother, the Old Testament, into his home. The two must journey together. The New Testament cannot be understood without the Old. It would be a building without a foundation. The Old without the New would be incomplete. It would be a tree without fruit.

Psalm 19 (18)

God speaks to us through nature and through the Bible The heavens are telling the glory of God;

and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;

yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

In them he has set a tent for the sun,

which comes forth like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them;

and there is nothing hid from its heat.

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;

the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;

the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever;

the ordinances of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.

Moreover, by them is thy servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

But who can discern his errors? Clear thou me from hidden faults.

Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me!

Then I shall be blameless,

and innocent of great transgression.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord,

my rock and my redeemer.

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank you for your word, which has helped us see better the will of the Father. Let your Spirit illumine all that we do and give us the strength to carry out that which your Word has made us see. Let us, like Mary, your Mother, not only listen to the Word but also put it into practice. You who live and reign with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

Monday, March 13, 2023

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Just and holy God, our loving Father,
You offered us Your hand in friendship and You sent us Your Son Jesus to go with us on the road of obedience and loyalty. God, we often hurt this friendship; we act as if we were not Your sons and daughters. See the look of shame on our faces.
Forgive us, for we count on You. Accept our thanks for continuing to take us as we are and loving us notwithstanding our sins.
We ask You this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Luke 4: 24-30

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

Reflection

Today's Gospel (Lk 4: 24-30) forms part of a larger part (Lk 4: 14-32). Jesus had presented His program in the synagogue of Nazareth, using a text from Isaiah which spoke about the poor, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed (Is 61: 1-2) and which mirrored the situation of the people of Galilee at the time of Jesus. In the name of God, Jesus takes a stand and defines His mission: to proclaim the Good News to the poor, to proclaim release to prisoners, to give back sight to the blind, to restore liberty to the oppressed. After finishing the reading, He updates the text and says, "Today this text is being fulfilled even while you are listening!" (Lk 4: 21). All those present were astonished (Lk 4: 16, 22b). But immediately after there was a reaction to discredit. The people in the synagogue were scandalized and did not want to know anything about Jesus. They said, "Is He not the son of Joseph?" (Lk 4: 22b). Why were they scandalized? What is the reason for this [unexpected] reaction?

Because Jesus quoted the text from Isaiah only to the part that says, "to proclaim a year of favor from the Lord," and He omits the end of the sentence, which says, "to proclaim a

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

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

Personal Questions

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

Concluding Prayer

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

Tuesday, March 14, 2023

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. God, 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 for ever and ever.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 18, 21-35

Then Peter went up to him and said, 'Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?' Jesus answered, 'Not seven, I tell you, but seventy-seven times.'

'And so, the kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who decided to settle his accounts with his servants. When the reckoning began, they brought him a man who owed ten thousand talents; he had no means of paying, so his master gave orders that he should be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, to meet the debt. At this, the servant threw himself down at his master's feet, with the words, "Be patient with me and I will pay the whole sum." And the servant's master felt so sorry for him that he let him go and cancelled the debt. Now as this servant went out, he happened to meet a fellow servant who owed him one hundred denarii; and he seized him by the throat and began to throttle him, saying, "Pay what you owe me." His fellow-servant fell at his feet and appealed to him, saying, "Be patient with me and I will pay you." But the other would not agree; on the contrary, he had him thrown into prison till he should pay the debt. His fellow-servants were deeply distressed when they saw what had happened, and they went to their master and reported the whole affair to him. Then the master sent for the man and said to him, "You wicked servant, I cancelled all that debt of yours when you appealed to me. Were you not bound, then, to have pity on your fellow-servant just as I had pity on you?" And in his anger the master handed him over to the torturers till he should pay all his debt. And that is how my heavenly Father will deal with you unless you each forgive 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 the heart. There are persons who say: "I forgive, but I do not forget!" Rancor, tensions, diverse opinions, insults, offences, provocations, all this 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 times seven! 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 themselves with the community (Mt 18, 15-20) Before 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 of always. Jesus goes far beyond the proposal of Peter. He eliminates any possibility of limitation to pardon: "Not seven I tell you, but seventy-seven times!" That is, seventy times always! Because there is no proportion

between the pardon which we receive from God and the pardon which we should offer to the brother, 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. Sevenfold vengeance for Cain but seventy-sevenfold 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 itself. The Deluge arrived and the Tower of Babel appeared for universal dominion (Gen 2, 1 to 11, 32).
- Matthew 18, 23-35: The parable of pardon without limits. The debt of ten thousand talents was approximately around 164 tons of gold. The debt of one hundred denarii was worth about 30 grams of gold. 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 to get 164 tons of gold. Before God’s love which forgives gratuitously our debt of 164 tons of gold, is more than just on our part to forgive gratuitously the debt of 30 grams of gold, seventy times always! The only limit to the gratuity of pardon of God is our incapacity to forgive our brother! (Mt 18,34; 6,15).
- The community, an alternative space of solidarity and of fraternity: the society of the Roman Empire was hard and without a heart, without any space 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 of the Synagogue. Besides this, toward the end of the first century, in the Christian communities began to appear the same divisions which existed in society between rich and poor (Jm 2, 1-9). Instead of making of the community a space of acceptance, they ran the risk of becoming a place of condemnation and conflict. Matthew wants to enlighten the communities, in such a way that these 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?
- In our community is there a space for reconciliation? How?

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 15, 2023

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

'Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete them. In truth I tell you, till heaven and earth disappear, not one dot, not one little stroke, is to disappear from the Law until all its purpose is achieved. Therefore, anyone who infringes 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.

Reflection

Today's Gospel (Mt 5, 17-19) teaches how to observe the law of God in such a way that its practice indicates in what its complete fulfilment consists (Mt 5, 17-19). Matthew writes in order to help the communities of the converted Jews to 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 the clarifying response of Jesus concerning his accusers. Thus, he gives 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 two or three 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 communities of the first Christians. 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 presence 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 and they even went so far as to say: "Anathema Jesus!" (1 Co 12, 3). Observing these tensions, Matthew tries to find some balance between both extremes. The community should be a space, where the balance can be attained and lived. The answer given by Jesus to those who criticized him continued to be actual 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 up themselves in the observance of the law. Like Jesus, they should advance, and show, in practice, which was the objective which the law wanted to attain in the life of persons, 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 all the law that Matthew recalls the other parable of Jesus: "Anyone who infringes 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 project 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 the law of God: as a growing horizon of light or as an imposition which limits my freedom?
- What can we do today for our brothers and sisters who consider all this type of discussion as obsolete and not actual? What can we learn from them?

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 16, 2023

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

He was driving out a devil and it was dumb; and it happened that when the devil had gone out the dumb man spoke, and the people were amazed. But some of them said, 'It is through Beelzebul, the prince of devils, that he drives devils out.'

Others asked him, as a test, for a sign from heaven; but, knowing what they were thinking, he said to them, 'Any kingdom which is divided against itself is heading for ruin, and house collapses against house. So, too, with Satan: if he is divided against himself, how can his kingdom last? - since you claim that it is through Beelzebul that I drive devils out. Now if it is through Beelzebul that I drive devils out, through whom do your own sons drive them out? They shall be your judges, then. But if it is through the finger of God that I drive devils out, then the kingdom of God has indeed caught you unawares. So long as a strong man fully armed guards his own home, his goods are undisturbed; but when someone stronger than himself attacks and defeats him, the stronger man takes away all the weapons he relied on and shares out his spoil.'

'Anyone who is not with me is against me; and anyone who does not gather in with me throws away.

Reflection

Today's Gospel is that of Luke. We already meditated on the parallel text of 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 dumb. The expulsion produced two different reactions. On the one side, the crowd of persons 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 the 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 the Tradition against the novelty of Jesus.
- Luke 11, 17-22: Jesus' answer is divided into three parts:
 - 1st part: Comparison with a divided kingdom. (vv. 17-18a) Jesus denounces the absurdity of the calumny of the Scribes. To say that he casts out the devils with the help of the prince of the 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 against him because they did not know how to explain the benefits which Jesus fulfilled for the people. They were afraid to lose their leadership. They felt threatened in their authority before the people.
 - 2nd part: through whom do your own sons drive them out? (vv. 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. (vv. 21-22) Jesus compares the devil to a strong man. Nobody, except a stronger person, can rob in the house of a strong man: Jesus is the strongest. This is why he succeeds to enter into the house and to get hold of the strong man. He succeeds in driving out the devils. Jesus seizes the strong man and now robs in his house, that is, he liberates the persons 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 evident 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 phrase: "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 to use 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 phrases seem to be contradictory, but they are not. The phrase in today's Gospel is said against the enemies who have a preconception against Jesus: "Anyone who is not with me is against me. And anyone who does not gather in with me throws away." The preconception and the lack of acceptance make dialogue impossible and break the union. The other phrase is said for the disciples who thought they had the monopoly on Jesus. "Anyone who is not against you is for you!" Many persons who

are not Christians practice love, goodness, justice, many times in a much better way than Christians. We cannot exclude them. They are brothers and workers in the construction of the Kingdom. We Christians are not the owners of Jesus. On the contrary: Jesus is our Lord!

Personal Questions

- “Anyone who is not with me, is against me. And anyone who does not gather in with me, throws away.” How does this take place in my life?
- “Do not stop him, because anyone who is not against you is for you!” How does this take place in my life?

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 17, 2023

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 to be lived,
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 who had listened to them debating appreciated that Jesus had given a good answer and put a further question to him, 'Which is the first of all the commandments?'

Jesus replied, 'This is the first: Listen, Israel, the Lord our God is the one, only Lord, and you must 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 must love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.'

The scribe said to him, 'Well spoken, Master; what you have said is true, that he is one and there is no other. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself, this is far more important than any burnt offering or sacrifice.'

Jesus, seeing how wisely he had spoken, said, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' And after that no one dared to question him anymore.

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 Mass 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 of the appearances and of the 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 wishes to profit of this occasion to ask a question to clarify something: "Which is the greatest commandment of all?" At that time; the Jews had an enormous amount of norms to regulate the observance of the Ten Commandments of the Law of God. 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: The response of Jesus. Jesus responds quoting a passage from the Bible to say 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 our strength!" (Dt 6, 4-5). At the time of Jesus, the 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. And Jesus adds, quoting the Bible again: "The second one is: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lec 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 of love is more important than the commandments which concern the worship and sacrifices of the Temple. The Prophets of the Old Testament already had affirmed this (Ho 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 conclusion of the Doctor 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, which is the first one, 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 into the Kingdom he had to still go a step forward. In the Old Testament the criterion of the love toward neighbor was: "Love the 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 the neighbor as Jesus has loved us." This is the sure path to be able to live together in a more just and fraternal way.

Personal Questions

- Which is the most important thing in religion for you?
- Today, are we closer or farther away from the Kingdom of God than the Doctor who was praised by Jesus? What do you think?

Concluding Prayer

Among the gods there is none to compare with you, for you are great and do marvelous deeds, you, God, and none other. (Ps 86,8.10)

Saturday, March 18, 2023

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 for ever.

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 19, 2023

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Opening Prayer

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

Create 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.

Gospel Reading - John 9: 1-41

A Key to the Reading:

The text of the Gospel of the fourth Sunday of Lent invites us to meditate on the healing of a man born blind. It is a short but lively text. It is a concrete example of the way the Fourth Gospel reveals the deep hidden meaning of the events in Jesus' life. The story of the healing of the blind man helps us open our eyes to the picture of Jesus that we each carry within ourselves. We often think of a Jesus who looks like a glorious king, removed from the life of ordinary people! In the Gospels, Jesus is presented as a Servant of the poor, friend of sinners. The picture of the Messiah-King that the Pharisees had in mind, kept us from recognising Jesus the Messiah-Servant. As we read the Gospel, let us try to pay attention to two things: (i) the expert and free way the blind man reacts to the provocations of the authorities, and (ii) the way the blind man himself opens his eyes concerning Jesus.

A Division of the Text as a Help to the Reading:

- John 9: 1-5: Blindness before the evil that exists in the world
- John 9: 6-7: The sign of the "One sent by God" who will provoke various reactions
- John 9: 8-13: The reaction of the neighbors
- John 9: 14-17: The reaction of the Pharisees
- John 9:18-23: The reaction of the parents
- John 9: 24-34: The final judgement of the Pharisees
- John 9: 35-38: The final attitude of the man born blind
- John 9: 39-41: A closing reflection

Text:

1 As he went along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth. 2 His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should have been born blind?' 3 'Neither he nor his parents sinned,' Jesus answered, 'he was born blind so that the works of God might be revealed in him. 4 'As long as day lasts we must carry out the work of

the one who sent me; the night will soon be here when no one can work. 5 As long as I am in the world I am the light of the world.'

6 Having said this, he spat on the ground, made a paste with the spittle, put this over the eyes of the blind man, 7 and said to him, 'Go and wash in the Pool of Siloam' (the name means 'one who has been sent'). So he went off and washed and came back able to see. 8 His neighbors and the people who used to see him before (for he was a beggar) said, 'Isn't this the man who used to sit and beg?' 9 Some said, 'Yes, it is the same one.' Others said, 'No, but he looks just like him.' The man himself said, 'Yes, I am the one.' 10 So they said to him, 'Then how is it that your eyes were opened?' 11 He answered, 'The man called Jesus made a paste, daubed my eyes with it and said to me, "Go off and wash at Siloam"; so I went, and when I washed I gained my sight.' 12 They asked, 'Where is he?' He answered, 'I don't know.' 13 They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. 14 It had been a Sabbath day when Jesus made the paste and opened the man's eyes, 15 so when the Pharisees asked him how he had gained his sight, he said, 'He put a paste on my eyes, and I washed, and I can see.' 16 Then some of the Pharisees said, 'That man cannot be from God: he does not keep the Sabbath.' Others said, 'How can a sinner produce signs like this?' And there was division among them. 17 So they spoke to the blind man again, 'What have you to say about him yourself, now that he has opened your eyes?' The man answered, 'He is a prophet.'

18 However, the Jews would not believe that the man had been blind without first sending for the parents of the man who had gained his sight and 19 asking them, 'Is this man really the son of yours who you say was born blind? If so, how is it that he is now able to see?' 20 His parents answered, 'We know he is our son and we know he was born blind, 21 but how he can see, we don't know, nor who opened his eyes. Ask him. He is old enough: let him speak for himself.' 22 His parents spoke like this out of fear of the Jews, who had already agreed to ban from the synagogue anyone who should acknowledge Jesus as the Christ. 23 This was why his parents said, 'He is old enough; ask him.'

24 So the Jews sent for the man again and said to him, 'Give glory to God! We are satisfied that this man is a sinner.' 25 The man answered, 'Whether he is a sinner I don't know; all I know is that I was blind and now I can see.' 26 They said to him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' 27 He replied, 'I have told you once and you wouldn't listen. Why do you want to hear it all again? Do you want to become his disciples yourselves?' 28 At this they hurled abuse at him, 'It is you who are his disciple, we are disciples of Moses: 29 we know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this man, we don't know where he comes from.' 30 The man replied, 'That is just what is so amazing! You don't know where he comes from, and he has opened my eyes! 31 We know that God doesn't listen to sinners, but God does listen to people who are devout and do his will. 32 Ever since the world began it is unheard of for anyone to open the eyes of someone born blind; 33 if this man were not from God, he wouldn't have been able to do anything.' 34 They retorted, 'Are you trying to teach us, and you a sinner through and through ever since you were born!' And they ejected him.

35 Jesus heard they had ejected him, and when he found him he said to him, 'Do you believe in the Son of man?' 36 'Sir,' the man replied, 'tell me who he is so that I may believe in him.' 37 Jesus said, 'You have seen him; he is speaking to you.' 38 The man said, 'Lord, I believe,' and worshipped him.

39 Jesus said: It is for judgement that I have come into this world, so that those without sight may see and those with sight may become blind. 40 Hearing this, some Pharisees who were present said to him, 'So we are blind, are we?' 41 Jesus replied: If you were blind, you would not be guilty, but since you say, 'We can see,' your guilt remains.

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

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

Some Questions

to help us in our personal reflection.

- What part of this text touched me most? Why?
- A popular saying goes: “None so blind as those who will not see!” How does this apply to the conversation between the blind man and the Pharisees?
- By what titles is Jesus hailed in the text? Who pronounces these? What do they mean?
- What title do I like best? Why? Or, what picture of Jesus do I carry in my mind and my heart? Where does this picture come from?
- How can I purify my eyes to see the true Jesus of the Gospels?

For Those Who Wish to Delve Deeper into the Text

The Context Within Which the Gospel of John was Written:

As we meditate on the story of the healing of the blind man, it is good to keep in mind the context of the Christian communities in Asia Minor towards the end of the first century for whom the Gospel of John was written and who identified with the blind man and his healing. Because of a legalistic view of the Law of God, they were blind from birth. But, as happened with the blind man, they too were able to see the presence of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and were converted. It was a painful process! In describing the steps and conflicts of the healing of the blind man, the author of the Fourth Gospel recalls the spiritual journey of the community, from the darkness of blindness to the full light of faith enlightened by Jesus.

A Commentary on the Text:

John 9: 1-5: Blindness before the evil that exists in the world

When the disciples see the blind man, they ask: “Rabbì, who sinned, this man or his parents, for him to have been born blind?” In those days, a physical defect or sickness was thought to be a punishment from God. Associating physical defects with sin was the way the priests of the Old Testament kept their power over people’s consciences. Jesus helps his disciples to correct their ideas: “Neither he nor his parents sinned...he was born blind so that the works of God might be displayed in him!” The works of God is the same as Sign of God. Thus, that which in those days was a sign of God’s absence, is now a sign of his brilliant presence in our midst. Jesus says: “As long as the day lasts I must carry out the work of the one who sent me; the night will soon be here when no one can work. As long as I am in the world I am the light of the world.” The **Day** of signs begins to manifest itself when Jesus, “on the third day” (Jn 2:1), makes present the “first sign” in Cana (Jn 2:11). But the day is about to end. The night is about to fall, because it is already “the seventh day”, the Sabbath, and the healing of the blind man is now the sixth sign (Jn 9:14). The **Night** is the death of Jesus. The seventh sign will be the victory over death at the resurrection of Lazarus (Jn 11). In John’s Gospel there are only seven signs, miracles, that announce the great sign, namely the Death and Resurrection of Jesus.

- John 9: 6-7. The sign of the “One sent by God” who will provoke various reactions Jesus spits on the ground, forms mud with his saliva, puts the mud on the eyes of the blind man and tells him to wash in the pool of Siloam. The man goes and comes back healed. This is the sign! John comments saying that Siloam means

sent. Jesus is the **One sent** by the Father who works the works of God, the signs of the Father. The sign of this 'sending' is that the blind man begins to see.

- John 9: 8-13: The first reaction: that of the neighbors
The blind man is well known. The neighbors have doubts: "Is this he?" And they ask: "How do your eyes come to be open?" The man who was blind testifies: "The **Man** called Jesus opened my eyes." The basis of our faith in Jesus is to accept that he is a human being like us. The neighbors ask: "Where is he?" - "I don't know!" They are not satisfied with the answer of the blind man and, to clarify matters, they bring the man before the Pharisees, the religious authorities.
- John 9: 14-17: The second reaction: that of the Pharisees
That day was a Sabbath and on the Sabbath it was forbidden to heal. When asked by the Pharisees, the man tells everything once more. Some Pharisees, blind in their observance of the law, say: "This man cannot be from God, he does not keep the Sabbath!" They could not admit that Jesus could be a sign of God because he healed the blind man on a Sabbath. But other Pharisees, faced by the sign, answer: "How could a sinner produce signs like this?" They were divided among themselves! So they asked the blind man: "What have you to say about him yourself, now that he has opened your eyes?" And he gives witness: "He is a **Prophet!**"
- John 9: 18-23: The third reaction: that of the parents
The Pharisees, now called the Jews, did not believe that he was blind. They thought that it was a matter of deception. So they called his parents and asked: "Is this man really your son who you say was born blind? If so, how is it that he is now able to see?" Very carefully the parents reply: "We know he is our son and we know he was born blind, but we don't know how it is that he can see now, or who opened his eyes. He is old enough: let him speak for himself!" The blindness of the Pharisees before the evidence of the healing produces fear among the people. And anyone who professed faith in Jesus **Messiah** was excluded from the synagogue. The conversation with the parents of the blind man reveals the truth, but the religious authorities will not accept it. Their blindness is greater because of the witness given, now they will not accept the law that says that the witness of two persons is valid (Jn 8: 17).
- John 9: 24-34: The final judgement of the Pharisees concerning Jesus
They call the blind man again and say: "Give glory to God! For our part we know that this man is a sinner." Here: "give glory to God" meant: "Ask pardon for the lie you just pronounced!" The blind man had said: "He is a prophet!" According to the Pharisees he should have said: "He is a sinner!" But the blind man is intelligent. He replies: "I don't know if he is a sinner; I only know that I was blind and now I can see!" There are no arguments against this fact! Again, the Pharisees ask: "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" The blind man answers with a touch of irony: "I have told you once.... Do you want to become his disciples too?" Then they insulted him and said: "You can be his disciple, we know that God spoke to Moses, but for this man, we don't know where he comes from." Again, with a touch of irony the blind man replies: "Now here is an astonishing thing! He has opened my eyes, and you don't know where he comes from! If this man were not from God, he couldn't do a thing." Faced with the blindness of the Pharisees, the light of faith grows in the blind man. He does not accept the logic of the Pharisees and confesses that Jesus **comes from the Father**. This profession of faith costs him his expulsion from the synagogue. The same was happening in the communities of the end of the first century. Those who professed faith in Jesus had to break all family and community ties. This happens today: those who decide to be faithful to Jesus run the risk of being excluded.
- John 9: 35-38: The attitude of faith of the blind man towards Jesus

Jesus does not abandon those who are persecuted for his sake. When Jesus hears of the expulsion and meets the man again, he helps him to take a further step by inviting him to take on his faith and asks: "Do you believe in the **Son of Man**?" He replies: "Sir...tell me who he is that I may believe in him?" Jesus said to him: "You are looking at him; he is speaking to you." The blind man exclaims: "**Lord**, I believe!" And he worships Jesus. The faith attitude of the blind man before Jesus is one of absolute trust and total acceptance. He accepts everything from Jesus. It is this faith that sustained the Christian communities of Asia towards the end of the first century, and that sustains us today.

- John 9: 39-41: A final reflection

The blind man who could not see, ends up seeing better than the Pharisees. The communities of Asia Minor who were once blind, discover the light. The Pharisees who thought that they saw well are more blind than the man born blind. Bound by an ancient observance, they lie when they say they can see. None more blind than those who will not see!

A Broader View:

- The Names and Titles given to Jesus

Throughout the story of the healing of the blind man, the Evangelist registers various titles, adjectives and names given to Jesus by a host of people, the disciples, the Evangelist himself, the blind man, the Pharisees and Jesus himself. This way of describing the events in the life of Jesus was part of the catechesis of the time. It was a way of helping people to clarify their own ideas concerning Jesus and to identify themselves in his regard. Here are some of the names, adjectives and titles. The list shows the growth of the blind man in faith and how his vision becomes clear.

- Rabbì (master) (Jn. 9: 1): the disciples
- Light of the world (Jn 9: 5): Jesus
- The One sent (Jn 9: 7): the Evangelist
- Man (Jn 9: 11): the healed man
- Jesus: (Jn 9:11): the healed man
- Does not come from God (Jn 9: 16): some Pharisees
- Prophet (Jn 9: 17): the healed man
- Christ (Jn 9: 22): the people
- Sinner (Jn 9: 24): some Pharisees
- We do know where he comes from (Jn 9: 31): the healed man
- Religious (Jn 9: 31): the healed man
- Does the will of God (Jn 9: 31): the healed man
- Son of man (Jn 9: 35): Jesus
- Lord (Jn 9: 36): the healed man
- Lord, I believe! (Jn 9: 30): the healed man
- The Name: "I AM"
To reveal the deep meaning of the healing of the blind man, the Fourth Gospel records the words of Jesus: "I am the light of the world" (Jn 9:5). In several places, in

answer to questions people put to Jesus, the Gospel repeats this same statement “I AM”:

- I am the bread of life (Jn 6:34-48)
- I am the living bread come down from heaven (Jn 6: 51)
- I am the light of the world (Jn 8: 12; 9: 5)
- I am the gate (Jn 10: 7, 9)
- I am the good shepherd (Jn 10: 11, 25)
- I am the resurrection and the life (Jn 11: 25)
- I am the way, the truth and the life (Jn 14: 6)
- I am the vine (Jn 15: 1)
- I am king (Jn 18: 37)
- I am (Jn 8: 24, 27, 58)

This self-revelation of Jesus reaches its peak in his conversation with the Jews, when Jesus says: “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He” (Jn 8: 27). The name I am is the same as Yahweh, the name God took in Exodus, an expression of his liberating presence between Jesus and the Father (Ex 3: 15). The repeated affirmation I AM reveals the deep identity between Jesus and the Father. The face of God shines in Jesus of Nazareth: “To have seen me is to have seen the Father!” (Jn 14: 9)

Prayer: Psalm 117 (116)

A resume of the Bible in one prayer Alleluia! Praise Yahweh, all nations, extol him, all peoples, for his faithful love is strong and his constancy never-ending.

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 20, 2023

Feast of St. Joseph, the Spouse of 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
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: 16-24

Jacob fathered Joseph the husband of Mary; of her was born Jesus who is called Christ. The sum of generations is therefore: fourteen from Abraham to David; fourteen from David to the Babylonian deportation; and fourteen from the Babylonian deportation to Christ. This is how Jesus Christ came to be born. His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph; but before they came to live together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being an upright man and wanting to spare her disgrace, decided to divorce her informally. He had made up his mind to do this when suddenly the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you must name him Jesus, because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins.' Now all this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: Look! the virgin is with child and will give birth to a son whom they will call Immanuel, a name which means 'God-is- with-us'. When Joseph woke up he did what the angel of the Lord had told him to do: he took his wife to his home; he had not had intercourse with her when she gave birth to a son; and he named him Jesus.

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 sons 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 sons" (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 adopted sons of God.

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

A constant idea in the Bible is the "dream" as a privileged place where God makes his projects and designs known, and sometimes reveals the future. The dreams of Jacob and Betel 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 down, to reveal the project of God, to heal, 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 also 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 Orientate the Meditation and Make it Relevant:

- What has struck you in this passage? Why?
- In the key to the reading, have we given enough consideration to some terms (adoption, angel, dream, just)? What sentiments or thoughts did these arise in your heart? What relevance can they have for your journey of spiritual maturation?
- Which do you think is the central message in this Gospel passage?

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 forever, 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 project 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.

Tuesday, March 21, 2023

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 Jewish festival, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in Jerusalem next to the Sheep Pool there is a pool called Bethesda in Hebrew, which has five porticos; and under these were crowds of sick people, blind, lame, paralysed.

One man there had an illness which had lasted thirty-eight years, and when Jesus saw him lying there and knew he had been in that condition for a long time, he said, 'Do you want to be well again?' 'Sir,' replied the sick man, 'I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is disturbed; and while I am still on the way, someone else gets down there before me.' Jesus said, 'Get up, pick up your sleeping-mat and walk around.' The man was cured at once, and he picked up his mat and started to walk around.

Now that day happened to be the Sabbath, so the Jews said to the man who had been cured, 'It is the Sabbath; you are not allowed to carry your sleeping-mat.' He replied, 'But the man who cured me told me, "Pick up your sleeping-mat and walk around." ' They asked, 'Who is the man who said to you, "Pick up your sleeping-mat and walk around"? ' The man had no idea who it was, since Jesus had disappeared, as the place was crowded. After a while Jesus met him in the Temple and said, 'Now you are well again, do not sin anymore, or something worse may happen to you.'

The man went back and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had cured him. It was because he did things like this on the Sabbath that the Jews began to harass Jesus.

Reflection

Today's Gospel describes Jesus who cures 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! Before 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 persons 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 demanded much water because of the numerous animals which were sacrificed, especially during the great festivals. This is why, near the Temple there were several cisterns where rainwater was gathered. Some could contain over one thousand litres. Close by, because of the abundance of water, there was a public bathing resort, where crowds of sick people gathered waiting for help or to be healed. Archeology has shown that in the same precincts of the Temple, there was a place where the Scribes taught the Law to students. On one side, the teaching of the Law of God. On the other, the abandonment of the poor. The water purified the Temple, but it did not purify the people.
- John 5, 3-4: The situation of the sick. These sick people were attracted by the water of the bathing resort. They said that an angel would disturb the water and the first one who would enter after the angel disturbed the water, would be cured. In other words, the sick people were attracted by a false hope. Healing was only for one person. Just as the lottery today. Only one person gets the prize! The majority pays and wins nothing. Precisely, in this situation of total abandonment, in the public baths, Jesus meets the sick people.
- John 5, 5-9: Jesus cures a sick man on Saturday. Very close to the place where the observance of the Law of God was taught, a paralytic had been there for 38 years, waiting for someone who would help him to go down to the water to be cured. This facts 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 succeed to experience solidarity, or mercy. Religion at that time, was not capable 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 a Saturday. 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 perceived the dramatic situation in which he was and cured him. He does not cure him to convert him, neither so that he would believe in God. He cures him because he wants to help him. He wanted him to experience some 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." At that moment, people thought and said: "Sickness is a punishment from God. God is with you!" Once the man is cured, he must 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 Saturday. In tomorrow's Gospel we have what follows.

Personal Questions

- 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 perceive any signs of solidarity?
- What does this teach us today?

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 22, 2023

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 answer to the Jews was, 'My Father still goes on working, and I am at work, too.' But that only made the Jews even more intent on killing him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he spoke of God as his own Father and so made himself God's equal.

To this Jesus replied: In all truth I tell you, by himself the Son can do nothing; he can do only what he sees the Father doing: and whatever the Father does the Son does too. For the Father loves the Son and shows him everything he himself does, and he will show him even greater things than these, works that will astonish you.

Thus, as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so the Son gives life to anyone he chooses; for the Father judges no one; he has entrusted all judgement to the Son, so that all may honor the Son as they honor the Father. Whoever refuses honor to the Son refuses honor to the Father who sent him.

In all truth I tell you, whoever listens to my words, and believes in the one who sent me, has eternal life; without being brought to judgement such a person has passed from death to life.

In all truth I tell you, the hour is coming -- indeed it is already here -- when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and all who hear it will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; and, because he is the Son of man, has granted him power to give judgement.

Do not be surprised at this, for the hour is coming when the dead will leave their graves at the sound of his voice: those who did good will come forth to life; and those who did evil will come forth to judgement. By myself I can do nothing; I can judge only as I am told to judge, and my judging is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him 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 Saturday, Jesus answers: “My Father still goes on working, and I am at work too!” The Jews taught that no work could be done on Saturday, 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 Saturday. 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 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 Saturday 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 it 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 to give 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 the 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 honour 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 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 phrase is the summary of all that has been said before. This was the idea that the community of the time of John had and diffused regarding Jesus.

Personal Questions

- How do you imagine the relationship between Jesus and the Father?
- How do you live faith in the resurrection?

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 23, 2023

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: "Were I to testify on my own behalf, my testimony would not be true; but there is another witness who speaks on my behalf, and I know that his testimony is true.

You sent messengers to John, and he gave his testimony to the truth- not that I depend on human testimony; no, it is for your salvation that I mention it. John was a lamp lit and shining and for a time you were content to enjoy the light that he gave.

But my testimony is greater than John's: the deeds my Father has given me to perform, these same deeds of mine testify that the Father has sent me. Besides, the Father who sent me bears witness to me himself. You have never heard his voice, you have never seen his shape, and his word finds no home in you because you do not believe in the one whom he has sent.

You pore over the scriptures, believing that in them you can find eternal life; it is these scriptures that testify to me, and yet you refuse to come to me to receive life! Human glory means nothing to me. Besides, I know you too well: you have no love of God in you. I have come in the name of my Father and you refuse to accept me; if someone else should come in his own name you would accept him. How can you believe, since you look to each other for glory and are not concerned with the glory that comes from the one God?

Do not imagine that I am going to accuse you before the Father: you have placed your hopes on Moses, and Moses will be the one who accuses you. If you really believed him you would believe me too, since it was about me that he was writing; but if you will not believe what he wrote, how can you believe what I say?

Reflection

John, interpreter of Jesus. John is a good interpreter of the words of Jesus. A good interpreter has to have a 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, 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 of 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 the sense or meaning of the words, but rather our own experience which has previously been acquired in the life of every day." (*Collationes X*, 11). Life enlightens the text, the text enlightens life. If, at times, the text says nothing, it is not because of lack of study or because of lack of prayer, but simply because of lack of depth in one's own life.

- John 31-32: The value of the witness of Jesus. The witness of Jesus is true because he does not promote or exalt himself. "There is another witness who speaks on my behalf", that is the Father. And his witness is true and deserves to be believed.
- John 5, 33-36: The value of the witness of John the Baptist and of the works of Jesus. John the Baptist also gave witness of 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 favour who is greater than the witness of John, and that is, the works which the Father carries out through him (Jn 14, 10-11).

- John 5, 37-38: The Father bears witness of 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 succeed to 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 to believe in him.

Personal Questions

- Life enlightens the text and the text enlightens life. Have you experienced this some times?
- Try to deepen the value of the testimony of Jesus.

Concluding Prayer

Yahweh, your kingship is a kingship for ever, 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 24, 2023

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

After this Jesus travelled round Galilee; he could not travel round Judaea, because the Jews were seeking to kill him.

As the Jewish feast of Shelters drew near, his brothers had left for the festival, he went up as well, not publicly but secretly.

Meanwhile some of the people of Jerusalem were saying, 'Isn't this the man they want to kill? And here he is, speaking openly, and they have nothing to say to him! Can it be true the authorities have recognized that he is the Christ? Yet we all know where he comes from, but when the Christ appears no one will know where he comes from.' Then, as Jesus was teaching in the Temple, he cried out: You know me and you know where I came from. Yet I have not come of my own accord: but he who sent me is true; You do not know him, but I know him because I have my being from him and it was he who sent me.

They wanted to arrest him then, but because his hour had not yet come no one laid a hand on him.

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 there 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; 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 make anti-Semitism grow. Today, it is very important to keep away from this type of polemics 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.
- 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? Have I discovered sometimes some anti-Semitism in me? Have I succeeded in eliminating it?
- Like in the time of Jesus, today also, there are many new ideas and opinions on things which refer to faith. What do I do? Am I attached firmly to the old ideas and close myself up in them, or do I try to understand the why, the reason for the novelty?

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 25, 2023

The Annunciation of the Lord

Opening Prayer

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

Gospel Reading – Luke 1: 26-38

The Context of the Passage:

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

An Aid to the Reading of this Passage:

- vv. 26-27: The first two verses place us at the time and sacred space of the event on which we are meditating and which we relive: we are in the sixth month from the conception of John the Baptist and in Nazareth, a city in Galilee, the land of the marginalized and unclean. Here God has come down to speak with a virgin, to speak to our hearts.
The persons involved in this unsettling event are presented to us: Gabriel, the messenger of God, a young woman called Mary and her spouse Joseph of the royal house of David. We too are made welcome into this company and are called to enter into the mystery.
- vv. 28-29: These are the very first words of the dialogue between God and his creature. Just a few words, a mere breath, but all-powerful words that disturb the heart, that question deeply the meaning of human life, plans and expectations. The angel announces joy, grace and the presence of God; Mary is disturbed and asks herself how can any of this be happening to her. Where can such a joy come from? How can such a great grace, that can change her very being, be hers?
- vv. 30-33: These are the central verses of the excerpt: it is the explosion of the announcement, the manifestation of the gift of God, of his omnipotence in the life of human beings. Gabriel, the strong, speaks of Jesus: the eternal king, the Saviour, the God made child, the humble all-powerful. He speaks of Mary, of her womb, of her life that she was chosen to be the gateway to welcoming God in this world and into the lives of all people. Even at this stage of the events, God begins to draw near, to knock. He stands, attentive, by the door of the heart of Mary; and even now by our house, our hearts...
- v. 34: Mary, faced by God's proposal, allows herself to stand naked, she allows herself to be read to her very depths. She speaks of herself, her heart, her wishes. She knows that for God the impossible is possible, she does not doubt or harden her heart and mind, she does not count the cost; she only wants to be fully available, open, and allows herself to be reached by that humanly impossible touch, but one already written, already realised in God. In a gesture of utter poverty, she places before God her virginity, her not knowing man. This is a complete and absolute surrender of self, full of faith and trust. It is her preliminary yes.
- vv. 35-37: God, most humble, gives an answer; the all-powerful bends over the fragility of this woman, who represents each one of us. The dialogue continues, the covenant grows and is strengthened. God reveals the how, he speaks of the Holy Spirit, of the fruitful overshadowing, which does no violence, does not break, but preserves intact. He speaks of the human experience of Elisabeth, he reveals another impossible thing made possible; almost like a guarantee or security. And then comes the last word when one must make a choice: to say yes or no, believe or doubt, dissolve or harden oneself, to open the door or close it. "Nothing is impossible for God."
- v. 38: The last verse seems to contain an infinity. Mary says her "Here I am", she opens herself wide to God and then the meeting, the union takes place forever. God enters into the human and the human becomes the place of God: these are the most sublime Nuptials possible on earth. And yet, the Gospel ends on a sad and hard note: Mary stays alone, the angel leaves. What remains, however, is the yes pronounced to God and God's presence; what remains is real Life.

The Text:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the House of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. He went in and said to her, 'Rejoice, you who enjoy God's favour! The Lord is with you.' She was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean, but the angel said to her, 'Mary, do not be afraid; you have won God's favour. Look! You are to conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David; he will rule over the House of Jacob for ever and his reign will have no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'But how can this come about, since I have no knowledge of man?' The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow. And so the child will be holy and will be called Son of God. And I tell you this too: your cousin Elizabeth also, in her old age, has conceived a son, and she whom people called barren is now in her sixth month, for nothing is impossible to God.' Mary said, 'You see before you the Lord's servant, let it happen to me as you have said.' And the angel left her.

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

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

A Few Questions

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

A Key to the Reading

Some important and strong words that resonate in this passage of the Gospel.

- **Rejoice!**

This is a really strange greeting from God to his creature; it seems hard to explain and perhaps even senseless. And yet, for centuries it resonated in the pages of Sacred Scripture and thus also on the lips of the Hebrew people. Rejoice, be glad, exult! Many times the prophets had repeated this gentle breath of God and had shouted the silent beat of his heart for his people, his remnant. I read this in Joel: "Land, do not be afraid; be glad, rejoice, for Yahweh has done great things... (2: 21-23); in Zephaniah: "Shout for joy, daughter of Zion, Israel, shout aloud! Rejoice, exult with all your heart, daughter of Jerusalem! Yahweh has repealed your sentence" (3: 14); in Zechariah: "Sing, rejoice, daughter of Zion, for now I am coming to live among you – Yahweh declares!" (2, 14). I read and listen to it, today, I say it also in my heart, in my

life; a joy is announced to me, a new happiness, never before experienced. I rediscover the great things that the Lord has done for me; I experience the freedom that comes from his pardon: I am no longer sentenced, but graced forever; I live the experience of the presence of the Lord next to me, in me. Yes, He has come to dwell in our midst; He is once more setting up his tent in the land of my heart, of my existence. Lord, as the Psalm says, you rejoice in your creatures (Ps 104: 31); and I too rejoice in you, thanks to you, my joy is in you (Ps 104: 34).

- **The Lord is with You**

These simple and enlightened words pronounced by the angel to Mary, liberate an all-powerful force; I realise that these words alone would suffice to save my life, to lift me up again from whatever fall or humiliation, to bring me back when I go astray. The fact that He, my Lord, is with me, keeps me alive, gives me courage and trust to go on being. If I am, it is because He is with me. Who knows but that the experience of Isaac told in Scripture might not be valid for me, the most beautiful thing imaginable that could happen to a person who believes in and loves God, when one day Abimelech came to Isaac with his men to tell him: "It became clear to us that Yahweh was with you" (Gen 26: 28) and then asked to become friends and form an alliance. Would that the same thing might be said of me; would that I could show that the Lord is truly with me, in my life, in my desires, in my affections, in my choices and actions; would that others might meet Him through me. Perhaps for this, it is necessary for me to absorb more the presence of God, for me to eat and drink of Him. Let me go to the school of Scripture, to read and re-read some passages where the voice of the Lord tells me again and again of this truth and, while He speaks, to be transformed, ever more in-dwelt. "Remain for the present in that country; I shall be with you and bless you" (Gen 26: 3). "To Joshua son of Nun, Yahweh gave this order: Be strong and stand firm, for you are to be the one to bring the Israelites into the country which I have promised them on oath, and I myself shall be with you" (Dt 31: 23). "They will fight against you but will not overcome you, because I am with you to save you and rescue you" (Jer 15: 20). "The angel of Yahweh appeared to him and said: Yahweh is with you, valiant warrior!" (Judges 6: 12). "Yahweh appeared to him the same night and said: I am the God of your father Abraham. Do not be afraid, for I am with you. I shall bless you and multiply your offspring for my servant Abraham's sake" (Gen 26: 24). "Be sure, I am with you; I shall keep you safe wherever you go, and bring you back to this country, for I shall never desert you until I have done what I have promised you" (Gen 28: 15). "Do not be afraid, for I am with you; do not be alarmed, for I am your God. I give you strength, truly I help you, truly I hold you firm with my saving right hand" (Is 41: 10)

- **Do not be afraid**

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

herself to the coming of God, letting go of all fears, incredulity, and a closed spirit. She repeats these same words of God in our lives and invites us to believe like her.

- **You Enjoy God's Favor**

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

- **Nothing is Impossible to God**

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

- **Here I Am**

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

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

A Time of Prayer: Psalm 138

Father, into your hands I commend my life. Yahweh, you examine me and know me, you know when I sit, when I rise, you understand my thoughts from afar. You watch when I walk or lie down, you know every detail of my conduct.

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

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

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

Where shall I go to escape your spirit? Where shall I flee from your presence? If I scale the heavens, you are there, if I lie flat in Sheol, there you are. You created my inmost self, knit me together in my mother's womb. For so many marvels I thank you;

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

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

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

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

Make sure that I am not on my way to ruin,

and guide me on the road of eternity.

Closing Prayer

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

Sunday, March 26, 2023

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Opening Prayer

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

Create 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.

Reading: John 11, 1-45

A Key to Guide the Reading:

Let us read the text, which describes the resurrection of Lazarus. During the reading, try to follow the group, the disciples who follow Jesus from Galilee to Bethany. You must follow attentively all the events, from the time that the announcement of the sickness of the Martha and Mary's brother was sent to Jesus who was in Galilee, to the time of the resurrection of Lazarus.

A Division of the Text to Assist a Careful Reading:

- John 11, 1-16: Jesus hears the news and sets out for Bethany to raise Lazarus.
- John 11, 17-31: Jesus meets the two sisters and Martha's profession of faith.
- John 11, 32-45: The great sign of the resurrection of Lazarus.

The Text:

1-16: There was a man named Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister, Martha, and he was ill. It was the same Mary, the sister of the sick man Lazarus, who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair. The sisters sent this message to Jesus, 'Lord, the man you love is ill.' On receiving the message, Jesus said, '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.' Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, yet when he heard that he was ill he stayed where he was for two more days before saying to the disciples, 'Let us go back to Judaea.' The disciples said, 'Rabbi, it is not long since the Jews were trying to stone you; are you going back there again?' Jesus replied: Are there not twelve hours in the day? No one who walks in the daytime stumbles, having the light of this world to see by; anyone who walks around at night stumbles, having no light as a guide. He said that and then added, 'Our friend Lazarus is at rest; I am going to wake him.' The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he is at rest he will be saved.' Jesus was speaking of the death of Lazarus, but they thought that by 'rest' he meant 'sleep'; so Jesus put it plainly, 'Lazarus is dead; and for your sake I am glad I was not there because now you will believe. But let us go to him.' Then Thomas-- known as the Twin -- said to the other disciples, 'Let us also go to die with him.'

17-31: On arriving, Jesus found that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days already. Bethany is only about two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him. Mary remained sitting in the house. Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died, but even now I know that God will grant whatever you ask of him.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said, 'I know he will rise again at the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said: I am the resurrection. Anyone who believes in me, even though that person dies, will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this? 'Yes, Lord,' she said, 'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who was to come into this world.' When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in a low voice, 'The Master is here and wants to see you.' Hearing this, Mary got up quickly and went to him. Jesus had not yet come into the village; he was still at the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were in the house comforting Mary saw her get up so quickly and go out, they followed her, thinking that she was going to the tomb to weep there.

32-45: Mary went to Jesus, and as soon as she saw him she threw herself at his feet, saying, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' At the sight of her tears, and those of the Jews who had come with her, Jesus was greatly distressed, and with a profound sigh he said, 'Where have you put him?' They said, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus wept; and the Jews said, 'See how much he loved him!' But there were some who remarked, 'He opened the eyes of the blind man. Could he not have prevented this man's death?' Sighing again, Jesus reached the tomb: it was a cave with a stone to close the opening. Jesus said, 'Take the stone away.' Martha, the dead man's sister, said to him,

'Lord, by now he will smell; this is the fourth day since he died.' Jesus replied, 'Have I not told you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?' So they took the stone away. Then Jesus lifted up his eyes and said: Father, I thank you for hearing my prayer. I myself knew that you hear me always, but I speak for the sake of all these who are standing around me, so that they may believe it was you who sent me. When he had said this, he cried in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his feet and hands bound with strips of material, and a cloth over his face. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, let him go free.' Many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what he did, believed in him.

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

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

Some Questions

to help us in our personal reflection.

- What drew your attention most in this very detailed account? Why?
- Which is the central and most important point of the whole narrative? Why?
- What was the attitude of the disciples? What did they say and do?
- What was the attitude of Martha and Mary? What did they say and do?
- What was the attitude of the Jews? What did they say, do and plan?
- With whom can you identify yourself most: the disciples, the sisters, the Jews, or none of these?
- Have you ever experienced times when despair and hope, life and death got confused in your thought? In times such as these, what kept up your faith?
- How does Lazarus rise to life today? How does resurrection take place today, giving new life to the poor?

A Key to the Reading

for those who wish to go deeper into the text.

The difference between the Gospel of John and that of the other three Evangelists.

- A comparison in order to understand the difference. Photo and X-Ray. You are in wonder at the beauty of nature before a sunrise. You see and contemplate what your eyes look at. This is the photo! Next to you, a friend says to you, "Have you noticed how that small cloud changed into a deeper colour? Our friendship is like this!" She saw more than that which the eyes were looking at. This is the X-Ray. Love for and faith in one another have expanded her vision. The Gospel of John is like this; it is the Gospel of the beloved disciple. He teaches us how to read the other Gospels and to discover in them a deeper dimension. The other three Gospels take photos of the miracles. John takes an X-Ray and reveals his deep sense of the divine, that which only faith can see by the working of the Spirit (John 14,26; 16,19). For instance, the synoptics mention twenty-eight different miracles. John only mentions seven and he calls them "signs." Of the seven, only three are found in the synoptics. The other four are exclusive to John: the marriage feast in Cana (Jn 2,1-11), the healing of the paralytic at the pool of Siloe (Jn 5,1-9), the healing of the man born

blind (Jn 9,1-7) and the resurrection of Lazarus (Jn 11,1-44). In the way he presents these "signs", John does much more than simply telling the miracle. He expands the facts so that they manifest Jesus as the revelation of the Father. John's Gospel tries to throw light on Jesus' saying, "To have seen me is to have seen the Father" (Jn 14,9). When we hold up to the light the X-Ray of Jesus in John's Gospel, we see the face of the Father.

- Lazarus' resurrection in the scheme of John's Gospel

The scheme of the seven signs:

 - 1st Sign: the marriage feast of Cana (Jn 2,1-12)
 - 2nd Sign: the healing of the nobleman's son (Jn 4,46-54)
 - 3rd Sign: the healing of the paralytic (Jn 5,1-18)
 - 4th Sign: the multiplication of the bread (Jn 6,1-15)
 - 5th Sign: Jesus walks on the water (Jn 6,16-21)
 - 6th Sign: the healing of the blind man (Jn 9,1-40)
 - 7th Sign: the raising of Lazarus (Jn 11,1-44)
- The great sign is the HOUR of Jesus' glorification.
- The seven signs are seven prefigurations of the glorification of Jesus, which will take place at the Hour of his passion, death and resurrection. Each sign symbolises one aspect of the meaning of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus for us. It is in "meditating day and night" through the Lectio Divina or Prayerful Reading that we shall discover this meaning, which will enrich our lives.
- The resurrection of Lazarus, the seventh sign, opens the way for the coming of the Hour, the glorification, which takes place through death (Jn 12,23; 17,1). One of the reasons why Jesus is condemned will be the resurrection of Lazarus (Jn 11,50; 12,10). Thus, the seventh sign will be in order to manifest the glory of God (Jn 11,4): "This sickness will end not in death but in God's glory and through it the Son of God will be glorified." The disciples cannot understand this (Jn 11,6-8). But even though they do not understand, they are ready to go and die with Jesus (Jn 11,16). Their understanding is slight, but their faith is right.
- The meaning of Lazarus' resurrection
 - In Bethany: Everything happens in Bethany, a small village at the foot of the Mount of Olives, near Jerusalem. In the story, Lazarus' family, where Jesus liked to go, is the mirror of the community of the Beloved Disciple at the end of the first century. Mirror also of our communities. Bethany means "House of the Poor." Martha means "Lady" (coordinator); a lady who coordinates the community. Lazarus means "God helps" the poor community, which hoped for everything from God. Mary means "beloved of Yahweh", the image of the community. The story of the resurrection of Lazarus wants to communicate this certainty: Jesus brings life to the community of the poor; he is the source of life for those who believe in him.
 - Between life and death: Lazarus is dead. Many Jews are at Martha and Mary's house to comfort them for the loss of their brother. Those who represent the Old Testament do not bring new life. They just console. Jesus is the one who brings new life! In John's Gospel, the Jews are also the enemies who wish to kill Jesus (Jn 10,31). So we have on one side the threat of death against Jesus, and on the other Jesus who comes to conquer death! It is in this context of conflict

between life and death that the seventh sign of the resurrection of Lazarus, of victory over death, takes place.

- Two ways of believing in the resurrection: The central point is the contrast between the old way of believing in the resurrection at the end of times, and the new brought by Jesus, which until now conquers death. Martha, the Pharisees and the majority of the people believed in the resurrection (Acts 23,6-10, Mk 12,18). They believed, but did not reveal it, because their faith was only in the resurrection at the end of times and not in the present resurrection of the story, here and now. That resurrection did not renew life. A link was missing. The new life of the resurrection comes with Jesus.
- Profession of faith in Jesus and profession of faith in life: Jesus challenges Martha to take that step. It is not enough to believe in the resurrection at the end of times, we must believe that Resurrection is already here today in the person of Jesus and in those who believe in him. Death no longer holds power over these, because Jesus is the "resurrection and the life." And, Martha, even though she has not yet seen the concrete sign of the resurrection of Lazarus, professes her faith: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who was to come into this world."
- Human, very human, equal to us in all things: After her profession of faith, Martha calls Mary, her sister. Mary goes to meet Jesus, who was still where Martha had met him. She repeats Martha's expression: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (Jn 11,21). Mary weeps, everyone weeps. Jesus is moved. When the poor weep, Jesus is moved and weeps. When they see Jesus weeping, the others say, "See how much he loved him!" This is the characteristic of the community of the Beloved Disciple: love between Jesus and the members of the community. Some do not believe and still doubt: "He opened the eyes of the blind, could he not have prevented this man's death?" For the third time, Jesus is moved (Jn 11,33.35.38). Thus, John stresses Jesus' humanity against those who, at the end of the first century, spiritualized the faith and denied the humanity of Jesus.
- For us, there only remains to remove the stone so that God may give life back to us: Jesus orders the stone to be removed. Martha reacts: "Lord, by now he will smell; this is the fourth day!" Once more, Jesus challenges her recalling her faith in the resurrection, here and now, as a sign of God's glory: "Have I not told you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?" They removed the stone. Before the open tomb and before the incredulity of those standing there, Jesus turns to the Father. First, he thanks the Father, "Father, I thank you for hearing my prayer. I knew indeed that you always hear me." The Father of Jesus is the same God who always hears the cry of the poor (Es 2,24; 3,7). Jesus knows the Father and trusts him. But now he asks for a sign for the sake of those who stand there, so that they may believe that he, Jesus, was sent by the Father. Then, he shouts aloud, "Lazarus, here. Come out!" And Lazarus comes out. This is the victory of life over death, of faith over unbelief! A farmer in the interior of Brazil commented, "It is up to us to remove the stone! And so God resurrects the community. There are those who do not want to remove the stone, and so in their community there is no life!"

Psalm 16 (15)

God is our birthright forever

Protect me, O God, in you is my refuge. To Yahweh I say, 'You are my Lord,

my happiness is in none of the sacred spirits of the earth.' They only take advantage of all who love them.

People flock to their teeming idols. Never shall I pour libations to them! Never take their names on my lips. My birthright, my cup is Yahweh; you, you alone, hold my lot secure. The measuring-line marks out for me a delightful place, my birthright is all I could wish. I bless Yahweh who is my counsellor, even at night my heart instructs me.

I keep Yahweh before me always,

for with him at my right hand, nothing can shake me. So my heart rejoices, my soul delights, my body too will rest secure, for you will not abandon me to Sheol, you cannot allow your faithful servant to see the abyss. You will teach me the path of life, unbounded joy in your presence, at your right-hand delight forever.

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 27, 2023

Season of Lent

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 have you got 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 sun rise in order 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 (Lv 20, 20; Dt 22, 22.24). They ask: "What is your opinion, what do you got to say?" It was a trap. If Jesus would have 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 outing. But Jesus is not frightened, nor does he get nervous. Rather, all the contrary. Calmly, as dominating the situation, 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. The contrary of what they expected takes place. The person condemned by the law was not the woman, but rather they who believed to be faithful to the law. At the end, Jesus remains 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: "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: Which were her feelings at that moment?
- Which are the steps which our community can and should take to accept those 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 29, 2023

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Our saving, merciful God, wandering in our deserts of injustice and lack of love, we cry out with fear or are stunned into silence, some into doubt or despair. Give us enough trusting faith to look up to him who took our evil and doubts upon himself, suffered for them on a cross, and rose from them, Jesus Christ, our Savior and our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 8, 21-30

Jesus said to them: I am going away; you will look for me and you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come. So the Jews said to one another, 'Is he going to kill himself, that he says, "Where I am going, you cannot come?"'

Jesus went on: You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I have told you already: You will die in your sins. Yes, if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.

So they said to him, 'Who are you?' Jesus answered: What I have told you from the outset. About you I have much to say and much to judge; but the one who sent me is true, and what I declare to the world I have learnt from him. They did not recognise that he was talking to them about the Father.

So Jesus said: When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will know that I am He and that I do nothing of my own accord. What I say is what the Father has taught me; he who sent me is with me, and has not left me to myself, for I always do what pleases him. As he was saying this, many came to believe in him.

Reflection

- Last week, the Liturgy led us to meditate on chapter five of the Gospel of John. This week it confronts us with chapter 8 of the same Gospel. Like chapter 5, chapter 8 also contains profound reflections on the mystery of God which surrounds the person of Jesus. Apparently, it is a question of dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisees (Jn 8, 13). The Pharisees want to know who Jesus is. They criticize him because he gives testimony of himself without any proof or witness to legitimize himself before the people (Jn 8, 13). Jesus responds by saying that he does not speak in his own name, but always for the Father and in the name of the Father (Jn 8, 14-19).
- In reality, the dialogues are also an expression of how the faith was transmitted in the catechesis in the communities of the beloved disciple toward the end of the first century. They show the prayerful reading of the word of Jesus that the Christians did, considering it Word of God. The method of question and answer helped to find the response to the problems which toward the end of the first century, the Jews raised to the Christians. It was a concrete way to help the community to deepen its faith in Jesus and in his message.
 - John 8, 21-22: Where I am going, you cannot come. Here John presents a new theme or another aspect which surrounds the person of Jesus. Jesus speaks about his departure and says that where he is going the Pharisees cannot follow him. "I am going away; you will look for me and you will die in your sin." They will look for Jesus, but will not find him, because they do not know him and will look for him with mistaken criteria. They live in sin and will die in sin. To live in sin is to live far away from God. They imagine God in a certain way, but God is different from what they imagine. This is why they are not capable to recognize the presence of God in Jesus. The Pharisees do not understand what Jesus wants to say and they take everything just literally: "Is he going to kill himself?"
 - John 8, 23-24: You are from here below; I am from above. The Pharisees consider everything according to the criteria of this world. "You are from this world; I am not from this world!" The framework of reference which guides Jesus in everything which he says and does is the world above, that is, God, Father, and the mission which he has received from the Father. The framework of reference of the Pharisees is the world below, without openness, closed up in its own criteria. This is why they live in sin. To live in sin is not to have the gaze of Jesus on their life. The look of Jesus is totally open toward God up to the point that God himself is in him in all his fullness (cf. Col 1, 19). We say: "Jesus is God." John invites us to say: "God is Jesus!" This is why Jesus says: "If you do not believe that I AM HE, you will die in your sins." I AM is the affirmation with which God presents himself to Moses at the moment of liberating his people from the oppression of Egypt (Ex 3, 13-14). This is the maximum expression of the absolute certainty of the fact that God is in our midst in the person of Jesus. Jesus is the definitive proof of the fact that God is with us. Emmanuel.
 - John 8, 25-26: Who are you? The mystery of God in Jesus does not fit in the criteria with which the Pharisees look toward Jesus. Once again, they ask: "who are you?" They did not understand because they do not understand Jesus' language. Jesus was very careful to speak to them according to all that he experienced and lived in union with the Father and for the knowledge and awareness of his mission. Jesus does not promote himself. He only says and expresses what he hears from the Father. He is the pure revelation because he is pure and total obedience.
 - John 8, 27-30: When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will know that I AM HE. The Pharisees did not understand that Jesus, in everything he says and

does, is the expression of the Father. They will understand it only after the Son of man will be lifted up. "Then you will know that I AM HE." The word lifted up has a double sense, to be lifted up on the Cross and to be lifted up to the right hand of the Father. The Good News of the death and resurrection reveals who Jesus is, and they will know that Jesus is the presence of God in our midst. The foundation of this certainty of our faith is twofold: on the one side, the certainty that the Father is always with Jesus and he never remains alone and, on the other side, the radical and total obedience of Jesus to the Father, which becomes total openness and total transparency of the Father for us.

Personal Questions

- The one who closes up in his own criteria and thinks that he already knows everything, will never be capable to understand others. This is the way the Pharisees were before Jesus. And I, how do I behave before others?
- Jesus is radical obedience to the Father and because of this he is total revelation of the Father. And which is the image of God which I show, which comes from me?

Concluding Prayer

Yahweh, hear my prayer,
let my cry for help reach you.
Do not turn away your face from me when I am in trouble;
bend down and listen to me, when I call, be quick to answer me! (Ps 102: 1-2)

Wednesday, March 29, 2023

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

To the Jews who believed in him Jesus said: If you make my word your home you will indeed be my disciples; you will come to know the truth, and the truth will set you free. They answered, 'We are descended from Abraham and we have never been the slaves of anyone; what do you mean, "You will be set free?"'

Jesus replied: In all truth I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave. Now a slave has no permanent standing in the household, but a son belongs to it for ever. So if the Son sets you free, you will indeed be free. I know that you are descended from Abraham; but you want to kill me because my word finds no place in you. 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. They repeated, 'Our father is Abraham.'

Jesus said to them: If you are Abraham's children, do as Abraham did. As it is, you want to kill me, a man who has told you the truth as I have learnt it from God; that is not what Abraham did.

You are doing your father's work. They replied, 'We were not born illegitimate, the only father we have is God.'

Jesus answered: If God were your father, you would love me, since I have my origin in God and have come from him; I did not come of my own accord, 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 to 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, 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 fulfils 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 neighbour 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

- Liberty which submits itself totally to the Father. Does something of this type exist in you? Do you know persons who are like that?
- Which is the deepest experience in me which leads me to recognize Jesus as the one sent by God?

Concluding Prayer

May you be blessed, Lord, God of our ancestors, be praised and extolled for ever.
Blessed be your glorious and holy name, praised and extolled for ever.
Blessed on the throne of your kingdom,
exalted above all, glorified for ever. (Dn 3,52.54)

Thursday, March 30, 2023

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

In all truth I tell you, whoever keeps my word will never see death.
The Jews said, 'Now we know that you are possessed. Abraham is dead, and the prophets are dead, and yet you say, "Whoever keeps my word will never know the taste of death." Are you greater than our father Abraham, who is dead? The prophets are dead too. Who are you claiming to be?'

Jesus answered: If I were to seek my own glory my glory would be worth nothing; in fact, my glory is conferred by the Father, by the one of whom you say, 'He is our God,' although 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 keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced to think that he would see my Day; he saw it and was glad.

The Jews then said, 'You are not fifty yet, and you have seen Abraham!' Jesus replied: In all truth I tell you, before Abraham ever was, I am.

At this they picked up stones to throw at him; but Jesus hid himself and left the Temple.

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 to discover the invisible thread that binds the paintings, the dialogues among themselves. 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.
- 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 spade 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 can we understand this phrase: "Abraham, your father, rejoiced in the hope of seeing my Day, he saw it and was glad"?

Concluding Prayer

Seek Yahweh and his strength, tirelessly seek his presence!
Remember the marvels he has done,
his wonders, the judgements he has spoken. (Ps 105,4-5)

Friday, March 31, 2023

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 fetched stones to stone him, so Jesus said to them, 'I have shown you many good works from my Father; for which of these are you stoning me?'

The Jews answered him, 'We are stoning you, not for doing a good work, but for blasphemy; though you are only a man, you claim to be God.' Jesus answered: Is it not written in your Law: I said, you are gods? So it uses the word 'gods' of those people to whom the word of God was addressed -- and scripture cannot be set aside. Yet to someone whom the Father has consecrated and sent into the world you say, 'You are blaspheming' because I said, 'I am Son of God.' If I am not doing my Father's work, there is no need to believe me; but if I am doing it, then even if you refuse to believe in me, at least believe in the work I do; then you will know for certain that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.

They again wanted to arrest him then, but he eluded their clutches.

He went back again to the far side of the Jordan to the district where John had been baptizing at first and he stayed there. Many people who came to him said, 'John gave no signs, but all he said about this man was true'; and many of them believed in him.

Reflection

We are close to Holy Week, during which we commemorate and update 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, mutually condemn one another, fight among ourselves, throughout history. Ecumenism is difficult among us, and at the same time it is necessary. In the name of God, many horrible things have been committed and we continue to commit them every day. Lent is an important period of time to stop and to ask ourselves: Which is the image of God which 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? Here appears again the tragic division between Jews and Christians, brothers, sons of the same father Abraham, who became irreconcilable enemies to the point that the Christians say "your law", as if it were not our law.
- 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 in 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. Sometimes, have I condemned someone in the name of God and then I have discovered that I was mistaken?
- Jesus calls himself "Son of God." When in the Creed I say that Jesus is the Son of God, which is the content that I give to my profession of faith?

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)