



Lectio Divina

English | February 2024 | ocarm.org

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¹ Presentation at the Temple by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, 1342 (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence)

Thursday, February 1, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer:

Lord our God,
help us to love You with all our hearts and to love all people as You love them.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, forever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 6: 7-13

Jesus summoned the Twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over unclean spirits. He instructed them to take nothing for the journey but a walking stick - no food, no sack, no money in their belts. They were, however, to wear sandals but not a second tunic. He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave from there. Whatever place does not welcome you or listen to you, leave there and shake the dust off your feet in testimony against them." So they went off and preached repentance. The Twelve drove out many demons, and they anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Reflection

- Today's Gospel continues what we have already seen in the Gospel yesterday. The passage through Nazareth was painful for Jesus. He was rejected by His own people (Mk 6: 1-5). The community, which had been His community, is no longer such. Something has changed. Beginning at that moment, as today's Gospel says, Jesus began to go around to the villages of Galilee to announce the Good News (Mk 6: 6) and to send the Twelve on a mission. In the '70's, the time when Mark wrote his Gospel, the Christian communities lived in a difficult situation, without any horizon. Humanly speaking, there was no future for them. In the year 64, Nero began to persecute the Christians. In the year 65, the revolt or uprising of the Jews in Palestine against Rome broke out. In the year 70, Jerusalem was completely destroyed by the Romans. This is why the description of the sending out of the disciples, after the conflict in Nazareth, was a source of light and of courage for the Christians.
- Mark 6: 7. The objective of the Mission. The conflict grew and closely affected Jesus. How does He react? In two ways:
 - 1) In the face of the mental stubbornness of the people of His community, Jesus leaves Nazareth and begins to go to the neighboring villages (Mk 6: 6).
 - 2) He extends the mission and intensifies the announcement of the Good News, calling other people to involve them in the mission.

He summons the Twelve, and begins to send them out in pairs, giving them authority over unclean spirits. The objective of the mission is simple and profound. The disciples participate in the mission of Jesus. They cannot go alone; they have to go in pairs, two by two, because two persons represent the community better than one alone and they can mutually help one another. They receive authority over unclean spirits, i.e., they are to be a help for others in suffering and, through purification, they are to open the door for direct access to God.

- Mark 6: 8-11 –: The attitudes which they should have in the Mission. The recommendations are simple: He instructed them to take nothing for the journey except a staff: no bread, no bag, no money for their purses; they were to wear sandals and not to take a spare tunic. And He told them, “If you enter a house anywhere, stay there until you leave the district. And if any place does not welcome you and people refuse to listen to you, as you walk away, shake off the dust under your feet, as evidence to them.” So they set off. It is the beginning of a new stage. Now not only Jesus but the whole group will announce the Good News of God to the people. If the preaching of Jesus caused conflict, much more now, there will be conflict with the preaching of the whole group. If the mystery was already great, now it will be greater since the mission has been intensified.
- Mark 6: 12-13 – The result of the mission. So they set off to proclaim repentance, and they cast out many devils and anointed many sick people with oil and cured them. The proclamation of the Good News produces conversion or a change in people; it alleviates suffering in people; it cures illnesses and casts out devils.

The sending out of the disciples on Mission. At the time of Jesus there were several other movements of renewal, for example, the Essenes and the Pharisees. They also sought a new way of living in community and they had their own missionaries (cf. Mt 23: 15). But these, when they went on mission, had prejudices. They took with them a bag and money to take care of their own meals, because they did not trust the food that people would give them, which was not always ritually pure. As opposed to other missionaries, the disciples of Jesus received various recommendations which helped them to understand the fundamental points of the mission which they received from Jesus and which is also our mission:

- They should go without taking anything. They should take nothing, no bag, no money, no staff, no bread, no sandals, no spare tunic. That meant that Jesus obliged them to trust in hospitality, because one who goes without taking anything goes because he trusts people and thinks that he will be well received. With this attitude they criticized the laws of exclusion, taught by the official religion, and showed, by means of the new practice, that they in the community had other criteria.
- They should eat what people ate or what the people gave them. They could not live separately, providing their own food, but they were to accept to sit at the same table (Lk 10: 8). This means that in contact with the people, they should not be afraid of losing purity as it was taught at that time. With this attitude they criticized the laws of purity which were in force and showed, by means of the new practice, that they had another type of access to purity, that is, intimacy with God.
- They should remain in the first house that welcomed them. They should live together in a stable way and not go from house to house. They should work like everybody else and live off what they received in exchange, because the laborer deserves his wages (Lk 10: 7). In other words, they should participate in the life and in the work of the people, and the people would have accepted them in the community and would have shared the food with them. This means that they had to have trust in sharing.
- They should take care of the sick, cure lepers and cast out devils (Lk 10: 9; Mk 6: 7- 13; Mt 10: 8). They had to carry out the function of Defender (“*go’el*”) and accept within the community those who were excluded. With this attitude they criticized the situation of disintegration of the community life of the clan and they aimed at concrete ways of correcting this. These were the four

fundamental points which had to give impetus to the attitude of the missionaries who announced the Good News in the name of Jesus: hospitality, communion, sharing and acceptance of the excluded (defender, “*go’el*”). If these four requirements were respected, they could and should cry out to the four ends of the earth: The Kingdom of God has come! (cf. Lk 10: 1-12; 9: 1-6; Mk 6: 7-13; Mt 10: 6-16). The Kingdom of God revealed by Jesus is not a doctrine, nor a catechism, nor a law. The Kingdom of God comes and becomes present when people, motivated by their faith in Jesus, decide to live in community to give witness and to manifest to all that God is Father and Mother and that, therefore, we human beings are brothers and sisters to one another. Jesus wanted the local community to be an expression of the Covenant, of the Kingdom, of the love of God the Father, who makes all of us brothers and sisters.

Personal Questions:

- Do you participate in the mission as a disciple of Jesus?
- Which point of the mission of the apostles is more important for us today? Why?

Concluding Prayer

Great is Yahweh and most worthy of praise in the city of our God, the holy mountain, towering in beauty, the joy of the whole world. (Ps 48: 1-2)

Friday, February 2, 2024

The Presentation of the Lord

Opening Prayer

O God, our Creator and Father, You willed that Your Son, generated before the dawn of the world, should become a member of the human family. Rekindle in us an appreciation for the gift of life, so that parents may participate in the fruitfulness of Your love, old people may pass on to young ones their mature wisdom, and children may grow in wisdom, piety and grace, all giving praise to Your holy name. Through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading: Luke 2: 22-40

When the days were completed for their purification according to the law of Moses, Mary and Joseph took Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, just as it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that opens the womb shall be consecrated to the Lord, and to offer the sacrifice of a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons, in accordance with the dictate in the law of the Lord.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, awaiting the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Christ of the Lord. He came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform the custom of the law in regard to him, he took him into his arms and blessed God, saying: “Now, Master, you may let your servant

go in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you prepared in the sight of all the peoples: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel.”

The child’s father and mother were amazed at what was said about him; and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted. And you yourself a sword will pierce so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”

There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived seven years with her husband after her marriage, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple, but worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer. And coming forward at that very time, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

- that the Word of God may dwell in us and that we may allow it to enlighten our lives;
- that before we share any comments, the very light of the Word may shine and dominate with the mystery of the living presence of the Lord.

Some Questions

to help us in our personal reflection.

- Why should Jesus, Son of the Most High, and His mother Mary, conceived without sin, obey the prescriptions of Moses? Was Mary perhaps not yet aware of her innocence and holiness?
- Is there special significance in the words and attitudes of Simeon and the prophetess Anna? Do not their actions and joy perhaps recall the style of the ancient prophets?
- How can we explain this "sword" that pierces? Is it a rending of consciences before the challenges and richness of Jesus? Or is it only the inner pains of the Mother?
- Can this scene mean anything to parents today: for the religious formation of their children; for the plan that God has for each of their children; for the fears and sufferings that parents carry in their hearts when they think of the time when their children grow up?

A Key to the Reading

for those who wish go deeper into the text.

- As laid down in the law of Moses/of the Lord. This is a kind of refrain repeated several times. Luke mixes two prescriptions without making any distinction. The purification of the mother was foreseen in Leviticus (12: 2-8) and was to take place forty days after the birth. Until then, the woman could not approach sacred places, and the ceremony was accompanied by the gift of a small animal. But the consecration of

the first-born was prescribed in Exodus (13: 11-16) and was considered a kind of "ransom" in memory of the saving action of God when He liberated the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. For this also the offering was a small animal. Throughout this scene, the parents seem to be in the process of presenting/offering their son as was done with sacrifices and Levites, while through the persons of Simeon and Anna it seems rather God who offers/presents the son for the salvation of people.

- Simeon and Anna: these are figures full of symbolic value. Their role is one of recognition, that comes from both the enlightenment and action of the Spirit and a life lived in expectation and faith. Simeon especially is defined as *prodek menos*, that is, one entirely absorbed in waiting, and one who goes forward to welcome. He, too, appears to be obedient to the law, the law of the Spirit, who leads him towards the child in the temple. The canticle he proclaims manifests his pro-existentia: he has lived in order to come to this moment, and now he withdraws so that others may see the light and the salvation to come for Israel and the gentiles. Anna completes the picture, by her very age (symbolic value: 84 equals 7x12, the twelve tribes of Israel; or $84 - 7 = 77$, double perfection), but above all by her way of living (fasting and praying) and by her proclamation to all who "looked forward". She is led by the Spirit of prophecy, docile and purified in her heart. Besides, she belongs to the smallest of the tribes, that of Asher, a sign that the small and fragile are the ones more disposed to recognize Jesus, the Savior. Both of these old people, who look like an original couple, are symbols of the best of Judaism, of faithful and meek Jerusalem, that awaits and rejoices and that from now on allows the new light to shine.
- A sword will pierce: generally, these words are interpreted as meaning that Mary will suffer, a drama made visible in Our Lady of Sorrows. Rather, we need to see the Mother as a symbol of Israel. Simeon feels the drama of his people who will be deeply torn by the living and sharp word of the redeemer (cf. Lk 12: 51-53). Mary represents the path: she must trust, but will go through times of pain and darkness, struggles and painful silences. The story of the suffering Messiah will be painful for all, even for the Mother. One does not follow the new light of the whole world without paying the cost, without being provoked to make risky choices, without being always born again from on high and in newness. But these images of the "sword that pierces," of the child who will "trip" and shake hearts from their lethargy, are not to be separated from the meaningful action of the two old people: the one, Simeon, takes the child in his arms to show that faith is a meeting and an embrace, not an idea or theorem; the other, Anna, takes on the role of proclaiming and en-kindles a bright light in the hearts of all who "looked forward" to Him.
- Daily life, an epiphany of God. Finally, it is interesting to note that the whole episode emphasizes the situation of the most simple and homely: the young couple with the child in their arms; the old man who rejoices and embraces, the old woman who prays and proclaims, those listening who appear to be indirectly involved. At the end of the passage, we also get a glimpse of the village of Nazareth, of the growth of the child in a normal context, the impression of a child extraordinarily gifted with wisdom and goodness. The theme of wisdom, woven into the fabric of normal life and growth in a village context, leaves the story as if in suspense, and it will be taken up again precisely with the theme of the wisdom of the boy among the doctors in the temple. Indeed, this is the episode that follows immediately (Lk 2:41-52).

Psalm 122

I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord!"

Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!

Jerusalem, built as a city which is bound firmly together, to which the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord. There thrones for judgment were set, the thrones of the house of David.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! "May they prosper who love you! Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers!"

For my brethren and companions' sake I will say, "Peace be within you!"

For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.

Final Prayer

Father, we praise You and we bless You because through Your Son, born of woman by the working of the Holy Spirit, born under the law, has ransomed us from the law and You have filled our life with light and new hope. May our families welcome and remain faithful to Your designs; may they help and sustain in their children the new dreams and enthusiasm, wrap them in tenderness when they are fragile, educate them in love for You and for all creatures. All honor and glory to You, Father. Amen.

Saturday, February 3, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Lord our God, help us to love You with all our hearts and to love all people as You love them.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, forever and ever. Amen.

Gospel reading - Mark 6: 30-34

The Apostles gathered together with Jesus and reported all they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while." People were coming and going in great numbers, and they had no opportunity even to eat. So they went off in the boat by themselves to a deserted place. People saw them leaving and many came to know about it. They hastened there on foot from all the towns and arrived at the place before them. When Jesus disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

Reflection

The Gospel today is in great contrast with that of yesterday. On one side, the banquet of death, wanted by Herod with the great of his kingdom in the Palace of the Capital, during which John the Baptist was murdered (Mk 6: 17-29); on the other side, the banquet of life promoted by Jesus with the hungry people of Galilee in the desert (Mk 6: 30-44). The Gospel today presents only the introduction to the multiplication of the loaves and describes the teaching of Jesus.

- Mark 6: 30-32. The welcome given to the disciples. At that time, the apostles rejoined Jesus and told Him all they had done and taught. And He said to them, "Come away to some lonely place all by yourselves and rest for a while." These verses show how Jesus formed His disciples. He was not concerned only with the content of the preaching, but also with rest for the disciples. He invited them to go to a lonely place so as to be able to rest and review what they had done.
- Mark 6: 33-34. The welcome given to the people. The people noticed that Jesus had gone to the other side of the lake, and they followed Him trying to go to Him by foot, to the other shore. So, as He stepped ashore He saw a large crowd, and He took pity on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd and He began to teach them at some length. Seeing that crowd, Jesus was sad, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. He forgets about His own rest and begins to teach them. In becoming aware that the people have no shepherd, Jesus began to be their shepherd. He begins to teach them.

As the psalm says, "The Lord 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. Even were I to walk in a ravine as dark as death I should fear no danger, for You are at my side. Your staff and Your crook are there to soothe me. You prepare a table for me in the sight of my enemies." (Ps 23 1: 3- 5). Jesus wanted to rest together with His disciples, but the desire to respond to the needs of the people impels Him to leave rest aside. Something similar happens when He meets the Samaritan woman. The disciples went to get some food. When they returned, they said to Jesus, "Master, eat something!" (Jn 4: 31), but He answers, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." (Jn 4: 32). The desire to respond to the needs of the Samaritan people leads Him to forget His hunger. My food is to do the will of the One who sent Me and to complete His work (Jn 4: 34). The first thing is to respond to the people who look for Him. Then He can eat.

Then Jesus began to teach them many things. The Gospel of Mark tells us many things that Jesus taught. The people were impressed: A new teaching! He taught them with authority! It was unlike that of the scribes! (Mk 1: 22, 27). Teaching was what Jesus did the most (Mk 2: 13; 4: 1-2; 6: 34). This is what He usually did (Mk 10: 1). For another fifteen times Mark says that Jesus taught. Was it perhaps because Mark was not interested in the content? It depends on what people understand when they speak about content! To teach is not only a question of teaching new truths in order to say something. The content which Jesus gave did not only appear in His words, but also in His gestures and in His way of relating with people. The content is never separated from the person who communicates it. Jesus was a welcoming person (Mk 6: 34). He wanted the good of the people. The goodness and the love which came from His words formed part of the content. They were His temperament. A good content without goodness and kindness would be like milk poured on the floor. Jesus' teaching manifested itself in a thousand ways. Jesus accepts as disciples not only men, but also women. He does not only teach in the synagogue, but also in any place where there were people to listen to Him: in the synagogue, in the house, on the shore, on the mountain, on the plain, in the boat, in the desert. It was not the relationship of pupil-teacher, but of disciple to Master.

The professor teaches and the pupil is with him during the time of the class. The Master gives witness and the disciple lives with Him 24 hours a day. It is more difficult to be a Master than a teacher! We are not pupils of Jesus, we are His disciples! The teaching of Jesus was a communication that came from the abundance of His heart in the most

varied forms: like a conversation by which He tries to clarify the facts (Mk 9: 9-13), like a comparison or parable that invites people to think and to participate (Mk 4: 33), like an explanation of what He Himself thought and did (Mk 7: 17-23), like a discussion which does not necessarily avoid polemics (Mk 2: 6-12), like a criticism that denounces what is false and mistaken (Mk 12: 38-40). It was always a witness of what He Himself lived, an expression of His love! (Mt 11: 28-30).

Personal Questions

- What do you do when you want to teach others something about your faith and your religion?
- Do you imitate Jesus? Jesus is concerned not only about the content, but also about rest. How was the religious education that you received as a child?
- Did the catechists imitate Jesus?

Concluding Prayer

How can a young man keep his way spotless? By keeping your words.

With all my heart I seek You; do not let me stray from Your commandments. (Ps 119: 9-10)

Sunday, February 4, 2024

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Lord, it is not herbs or emollients that can cure the wounds and diseases of our souls, but Your Word, which sustains everything, creates everything anew every day. Come, stretch forth Your strong hand over us so that, held by You, we may let ourselves be raised and begin to be Your disciples, Your servants. Jesus, You are the Gate of the sheep, the Gate that opens onto heaven; to You we come with all that we are and all that we have in our hearts. Take us with You, in silence, into the flowering desert of Your company and there teach us to pray with Your voice, Your word, so that we too may become heralds of the Kingdom. Send now Your Spirit upon us in abundance so that we may listen to You with all our hearts and minds. Amen.

Gospel Reading – Mark 1: 29-39

Placing the Passage in Its Context:

Continuing from the preceding verses (21-28), this passage describes the conclusion of a typical day with Jesus. He is in Capernaum, on a Sabbath, and after taking part in the liturgy in the synagogue, Jesus continues the celebration in Peter's house, in an intimate atmosphere.

When sunset comes and after a rest, Jesus continues His ministry going throughout Galilee. The Gospel presents me with three sequences that are historical and lets me know what Jesus did in Capernaum, but also reveals the great mystery of the salvation by Christ that upsets my life. These events may help to fix my attention on the journey

Jesus took: from the synagogue to the house, to the desert and to all the villages in Galilee. The Evangelist also emphasizes the passing of time, the coming of the night, that is, sunset, and then the morning still immersed in darkness.

Some Assistance in the Reading of this Passage:

- vv. 29-31: Jesus enters Peter's house and accepts the disciples' request. He cures Peter's mother-in-law, who is lying in bed with a fever.
- vv. 32-34: After the Sabbath, Jesus heals many sick and possessed persons who are brought to Him.
- vv. 35-39: Jesus wakes up before dawn and goes to pray in a solitary place, but many people follow Him and finally find Him. He leads them to a wider ministry that embraces the whole of Galilee.

The Text:

On leaving the synagogue Jesus entered the house of Simon and Andrew with James and John. Simon's mother-in-law lay sick with a fever. They immediately told him about her. He approached, grasped her hand, and helped her up. Then the fever left her and she waited on them. When it was evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were ill or possessed by demons. The whole town was gathered at the door. He cured many who were sick with various diseases, and he drove out many demons, not permitting them to speak because they knew him. Rising very early before dawn, he left and went off to a deserted place, where he prayed. Simon and those who were with him pursued him and on finding him said, "Everyone is looking for you." He told them, "Let us go on to the nearby villages that I may preach there also. For this purpose have I come." So he went into their synagogues, preaching and driving out demons throughout the whole of Galilee.

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

I enter into the silence that Jesus has prepared for me with His deep healing action, with His prayer that overcomes the night. Thus, I dispose my being to seek Jesus ceaselessly and to follow Him wherever He takes me.

Some Questions

that may help my spiritual ears to listen more deeply and the eyes of my heart to contemplate until I meet Jesus gaze.

- Jesus leaves the synagogue to enter Peter's house, which becomes the brilliant center of His saving action. I try to follow Jesus' journey: He enters the most intimate part of the house, namely, the bedroom. I reflect, seeking and looking for the "way" that is within me, house of God. Do I allow Jesus to go into the deepest part of me, even to my heart? I observe and note Jesus' gestures. Quickly He goes in, He approaches, takes the hand, raises. These are terms typical of the resurrection. Do I hear the Lord saying to me, too, "Arise, get up, be born again!?" I note the insistence on darkness: sunset, still dark. Why? What does this mean? What other terms can I relate to these expressions? All came crowding at Jesus' door. Am I among them? Jesus' word resonates in my heart: "Knock and it shall be opened to you". I try to imagine the scene. I lift my arm and knock at Jesus' door. He opens. What shall I say to Him? And how will He answer me? They knew Him. I ask myself concerning my

relationship with the Lord, "Do I really know Him? Or do I just go on hearsay, as Job says?" I look at myself and ask Jesus to help me with this relationship of discovery, of closeness, of communion and sharing with Him. I try to remember some verses that may help me: "Lord, make me know Your ways"; "Show me Your face". Jesus prays in a desert place. Am I afraid to go with Him into that prayer through the night that precedes the light? Am I afraid of moments of silence, alone with Him? And went off to a lonely place and prayed there. He was praying. This tells me of a calm, long and deep action. Would I rather run away and not wish to stop? Set out in search of Him in Jesus' footsteps.

This is a beautiful expression, which reminds me of the manuscript of St. Therese of the Child Jesus where she says that the shining footsteps of Jesus are spread throughout the pages of the Gospel. I reflect. Have I ever committed myself to following these footsteps, sometimes well defined, at other times almost imperceptible? Do I know how to recognize them, even along the paths of time and of the history of each day, mine and that of others? Is there a special trace of Jesus, an indelible imprint that He has left on the earth of my heart, of my life?

- I pause on the last verses and note the verbs of motion, of action: "Let us go elsewhere, so that I can proclaim the message there too, because that is why I came." And He went preaching. I know that I too am called to go and proclaim love and salvation in Jesus. Am I ready, with the grace and strength that come from this Word that I have pondered, to take on now a concrete, clear, even small commitment to proclaiming and evangelizing? To whom shall I go? What steps do I wish to take?

A Key to the Reading

I can take various paths in order to go deeper into the text, paths that can help me enter more into dialogue with the Lord and to listen to His Word.

- *The passage from the synagogue to the Church*
- The synagogue is the mother, but the Church is the spouse. Jesus, who is the Spouse, reveals her to us and makes us know the beauty and splendor that radiates from her for us. If we try to follow Him, in the Gospels, we realize that Jesus leads us on a journey of salvation from the synagogue to the Church. Mark, as well as Luke, insists much on the bond that Jesus quickly establishes with the synagogue, which becomes the privileged and sacred place of His revelation and the place for teaching. I read, for instance, Mk 1: 21 and Mk 6: 2, or Lk 4: 16 and 6: 6 and also Jn 6: 59. During His passion Jesus will say before Pilate that He has always taught openly in the synagogue and in the temple (Jn 18:20). It is also the place of healing where Jesus reveals Himself as a powerful healer, who heals and saves: see, for instance, Mk 1: 23 and 3: 1. This double action of Jesus becomes the bridge over which one goes to the new house of God, house of prayer for all peoples, that is, the Church: a house with open doors so that no one need stay outside. We are all invited to enter, with Jesus, into this place of reconciliation, communion and salvation. Christ loves the Church (Eph 5: 25), because He is her Head (Eph 1: 22; 5: 23), has acquired her with His own blood (Acts 20: 28) and does not cease to nourish and take care of her (Eph 5: 29). She is the spiritual edifice made of living stones, that is, we ourselves, as we read in St. Peter (1Pt 2: 4 ff). However, life gushes out of us like water from the rock if we abandon ourselves to the Lord (Eph 5:24) as a reciprocal gift of love and trust, if we persevere in constant prayer and for all (Acts 12:5) and if we share in the passion of

the Lord for humankind (Col 1:24). The Church is the pillar and the support of truth (1 Tim 3: 15). It is beautiful to walk in her, united with Christ the Lord.

- **Fever as a Sign of Sin**

As the etymology of the Greek word itself says, fever is like a fire that flares inside us and consumes us negatively, attacking our inner and spiritual energies, rendering us incapable of doing good. In Psalm 31, for instance, we find a very eloquent expression that may well describe the action of the fever of sin in us: "My heart grew parched, a stubble in summer drought. At last I admitted to You I had sinned " (Ps 31: 4ff). The only way to get well is what we saw in the Gospel, that is, by confession, by placing our evil before the Lord (Wis 16: 16). In Deuteronomy also fever is expressed as a consequence of being far away from God, of the hardness of heart that will not listen to His voice and follow His ways (Dt 28: 15, 22; 32: 24).

- **Jesus merciful healer**

This Gospel passage, like many others, allows us to meet Jesus, who, as true healer and true medicine, comes to us to touch our worst wounds, our worst illnesses and heal them, a healing that is always salvation. He is the Samaritan who, throughout our life's journey, sees us with certainty and a keen and loving gaze and does not go by but approaches us, bends over us, bandages our wounds and pours into them the good medicine that comes from His heart. There are so many episodes in the Gospels that tell us of healing brought about by Jesus. Limiting myself to Mark's Gospel I can quote Mk 2 :1-12; 3: 1-6; 5: 25-34; 6: 54-56; 7: 24-30; 7: 31-37; 8: 22-26; 10: 46-52. Reflecting on these passages and appreciating their deeper meaning can help me absorb better Jesus' characteristics, He who heals, and thus I, too, by listening deeply to His Word, may be healed in my inner self and in my whole being. For instance, I may dwell on the verbs or the particular gestures of Jesus that are repeated in many of these stories and thus more and more bring to light the words He pronounces. I realize that it is not so much the gestures of Jesus that bring about the healing, but His word: "Get up and walk; go in peace; go; go, your faith has saved you." He rarely uses specific gestures that draw attention and confuse. The following are some of these: "taking him by the hand; taking him aside; he laid; He laid His hand". These stories echo the words of the Psalm that says, "sending his word and curing them" (Ps 106: 20). Jesus is the Lord, He who heals, as the book of Exodus proclaimed (Ex 15: 26), and He is that because He Himself has taken on Himself our infirmity, our sins. He is the wounded healer who heals us with His wounds (cf. 1 Pt 2: 24-25).

- **The Night, Darkness Transformed by the Lssaight of Jesus**

The theme of the night, of darkness, runs through a good part of Scripture, from the very first verses when light appears as the first manifestation of the force of the love of God who creates and saves. Light follows darkness, day follows night, and in parallel the Bible tells us that the interior darkness, which can invade humankind, is followed by the new light of salvation and of meeting with God, of the embrace of that brilliant gaze that enraptures. "To you, night would be as light as day" says Psalm 138: 12 and it is true, because the Lord is light itself. "Yahweh is my light and my salvation," says Psalm 26: 1. In John's Gospel, Jesus says of Himself that He is the light of the world (Jn 9: 5), to tell us that whoever follows Him does not walk in darkness; indeed, it is He who, as Word of God, becomes light to our steps in this world (Ps 118: 105). Darkness is often associated with the shadow of death, that is to say that spiritual darkness is the same as death. Read Psalm 87: 7; 106: 10, 14. The Lord's strong arm defeats darkness; it seizes us in its clutches and frees us, splitting the chains that

oppress us. "Let there be light" is an eternal word that God ceaselessly pronounces and that reaches every human being in every situation.

- "Stay with us Lord. It is already night." (Lk 24: 9) is the prayer of the two from Emmaus, but it is also the prayer of us all. The words of the bride in the Canticle resonate on our lips, "Before the shadows flee, return! Be, my beloved (Song 2:1 7).

St. Paul helps us run a very strong interior journey that brings us close to Christ and that saves us from sin. He invites us, "The night is almost over; it will be daylight soon. Let us give up all the things we prefer to do under cover of the dark; let us arm ourselves and appear in the light." (Rom 13: 12). "You are all sons of the light and sons of the day; we do not belong to the night or to darkness." (1 Thess 5:5). In many ways, the Word invites us to be children of the light and brings us into the light of the divine Sun, who is Jesus, the East, to be enlightened and transfigured. The more we give ourselves to the light of Christ, the more will the word of the Apocalypse be true for us, "It will never be night again and they will not need lamplight or sunlight, because the Lord God will be shining on them. They will reign forever and ever." (Rev 22: 5).

A Moment of Prayer: Psalm 29

Thanksgiving hymn for liberation from a great trial.

Refrain: Into Your hands, Lord, I commend my life.

I will extol thee, O Lord, for Thou hast drawn me up,

and hast not let my foes rejoice over me. O Lord my God, I cried to Thee for help, and Thou hast healed me.

O Lord, Thou hast brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit. Refrain

Sing praises to the Lord, O you His saints, and give thanks to His holy name.

For His anger is but for a moment, and His favor is for a lifetime.

Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning. As for me, I said in my prosperity, "I shall never be moved."

By thy favor, O Lord,

thou hadst established me as a strong mountain; Thou didst hide Thy face, I was dismayed.

Refrain

To Thee, O Lord,

I cried; and to the Lord I made supplication: "What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise Thee?

Will it tell of Thy faithfulness?

Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me! O Lord, be Thou my helper!"

Thou hast turned my mourning into dancing;

Thou hast loosed my sackcloth and girded me with gladness, that my soul may praise Thee and not be silent.

O Lord my God, I will give thanks to Thee for ever. Refrain

Closing Prayer

Lord, I want to praise You, bless and thank You with all my heart for this Your Word, written for me, today, proclaimed by Your Love for me, because You truly love me. Thank You, because You came, You came down, You came into my house and have touched the place where I was not well, where I burned with a terrible fever. You touched me when I was far away and alone. And You seized me. You took me by the hand and made me get up, restoring me to that full and true life that comes from You, that I live close to You. Hence I am now happy, my Lord.

Thank You because You have bypassed my darkness, because You have defeated night with Your powerful, solitary and loving prayer. You have shone Your light in me, in my eyes, and now I, too, see anew and am enlightened from within. I pray with You and I grow, precisely because I pray with You. Lord, thank You because You urge me on towards the other, towards new worlds, new ways, outside the door of my house. I am not of the world, I know, but I am and remain in the world to continue loving it and to evangelize it. Lord, Your Word can make the world a truly beautiful place. Thank You, Lord. Amen.

Monday, February 5, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father,

watch over Your family and keep us safe in Your care, for all our hope is in You.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, forever and ever. Amen.

Gospel reading - Mark 6: 53-56

After making the crossing to the other side of the sea, Jesus and his disciples came to land at Gennesaret and tied up there. As they were leaving the boat, people immediately recognized him. They scurried about the surrounding country and began to bring in the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. Whatever villages or towns or countryside he entered, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and begged him that they might touch only the tassel on his cloak; and as many as touched it were healed.

Reflection

The text of today's Gospel is the final part of the whole passage of Mark 6: 45-56, which presents three different themes:

- a) Jesus goes to the mountain alone to pray (Mk 6: 45-46);
- b) Immediately after, He walks on the water, goes toward the disciples who are struggling against the waves of the sea (Mk 6: 47-52);

Now, in today's Gospel, when they were already on the shore, the people look for Jesus so that He can cure their sick (Mk 6: 53-56).

Mark 6: 53-56. The search of the people. At that time, Jesus and His disciples having made the crossing, they came to land at Gennesaret. When they disembarked, the people recognized Him at once. The people were numerous. They came from all parts, bringing their sick. The enthusiasm of the people who look for Jesus, recognize Him, and follow Him is surprising. What impels people to search for Jesus is not only the desire to encounter Him, to be with Him, but rather the desire to be cured of their sicknesses. Hurrying through the countryside, they brought the sick on stretchers to wherever they heard He went.

And wherever He went, to village or town or farm, they laid down the sick in the open spaces, begging Him to let them touch even the fringe of His cloak, and all those who touched Him were saved. The Gospel of Matthew comments and enlightens this fact quoting the figure of the Servant of Yahweh, of whom Isaiah says, "Yet ours were the sufferings he was bearing, ours the sorrows he was carrying." (Is 53: 4 and Mt 8: 16- 17)

To teach and to cure, to cure and to teach. Right from the beginning of His apostolic activity, Jesus goes through all the villages of Galilee, to speak to the people about the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God (Mk 1: 14-15). There, wherever He finds people to listen to Him, He speaks and transmits the Good News of God; He accepts the sick, in all places: in the synagogues during the celebration of the Word on Saturday (Mk 1: 21; 3: 1; 6: 2); in the informal meetings in the houses of friends (Mk 2: 1, 15; 7: 17; 9: 28; 10: 10); walking on the street with the disciples (Mk 2: 23); along the beach, sitting in a boat (Mk 4: 1); in the desert where He took refuge and where people looked for Him (Mk 1: 45; 6: 32-34); on the mountain from where He proclaimed the Beatitudes (Mt 5: 1); in the squares of the villages and of the cities, where the people took their sick (Mk 6: 55-56); in the Temple of Jerusalem, on the occasion of pilgrimages, every day without fear (Mk 14: 49)! To cure and to teach, to teach and to cure, that is what Jesus did the most (Mk 2: 13; 4: 1-2; 6: 34). This is what He used to do (Mk 10: 1). The people were amazed (Mk 12: 37; 1: 22, 27; 11: 18) and they looked for Him, as a crowd.

The origin of this great enthusiasm of the people was, on the one hand, the person of Jesus who called and attracted and, on the other hand, the abandonment in which people lived, they were like sheep without a shepherd (cf. Mk 6: 34). In Jesus, everything was revelation of what impelled Him from within! He not only spoke of God, but He also revealed Him. He communicated something of what He Himself lived and experienced. He not only announced the Good News. He Himself was a proof, a living witness of the Kingdom. In Him was manifested what happens when a human being allows God to reign in His life. What has value, what is important, is not only the words, but also, and above all, the witness, the concrete gesture. This is the Good News which attracts!

Personal Questions

The enthusiasm of the people for Jesus, looking for the sense of life and a solution for their ills. Where does this exist today? Does it exist in you? Does it exist in others?

What attracts is Jesus' loving attitude toward the poor and the abandoned. And I? How do I deal with the people excluded by society?

Concluding Prayer

How countless are Your works, Yahweh, all of them made so wisely!
The earth is full of Your creatures. Bless Yahweh, my soul. (Ps 104: 24, 35)

Tuesday, February 6, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father,

watch over Your family and keep us safe in Your care, for all our hope is in You.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, forever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 7: 1-13

When the Pharisees with some scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, they observed that some of his disciples ate their meals with unclean, that is, unwashed, hands. (For the Pharisees and, in fact, all Jews, do not eat without carefully washing their hands, keeping the tradition of the elders. And on coming from the marketplace they do not eat without purifying themselves. And there are many other things that they have traditionally observed, the purification of cups and jugs and kettles and beds.) So the Pharisees and scribes questioned him, "Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders but instead eat a meal with unclean hands?" He responded, "Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites, as it is written: This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines human precepts. You disregard God's commandment but cling to human tradition." He went on to say, "How well you have set aside the commandment of God in order to uphold your tradition! For Moses said, Honor your father and your mother, and whoever curses father or mother shall die. Yet you say, "If someone says to father or mother, 'Any support you might have had from me is *'qorban'* (meaning, dedicated to God), you allow him to do nothing more for his father or mother. You nullify the word of God in favor of your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many such things."

Reflection

The Gospel today speaks about the religious traditions of that time and of the Pharisees who taught this tradition to the people, for example, to eat without washing their hands, as they said, "to eat with impure hands." Many of these traditions were separated from life and had lost their significance. But even if this was the state of things, these traditions were kept and taught, either because of fear or because of superstition. The Gospel presents some instructions of Jesus concerning these traditions.

- Mark 7: 1-2: Control of the Pharisees and liberty of the disciples. The Pharisees and some, who had come from Jerusalem, observed how the disciples of Jesus ate bread with impure hands. Here there are three points which deserve to be highlighted: a) They were from Jerusalem, from the capital city! This means that they had come to

observe and to control what Jesus did. b) The disciples do not wash their hands before eating! This means that being with Jesus impels them to have the courage to transgress the norms which tradition imposed on the people, but that no longer had any sense, any meaning for life. c) The practice of washing hands, which up until now continues to be an important norm of hygiene, had assumed for them a religious significance which served to control and discriminate against people.

- Mark 7: 3-4: The Tradition of the Ancients. The Tradition of the Ancients transmitted norms which had to be observed by the people in order to have the purity required by the Law. The observance of the Law was a very serious matter for the people of that time. They thought that an impure person could not receive the blessings promised by God to Abraham. The norms on purity were taught in order to open the way to God, source of peace. In reality, instead of being a source of peace, the norms constituted a prison, slavery. For the poor, it was practically impossible to observe the hundreds of norms, of traditions and of laws. For this reason, they were considered ignorant and damned persons who did not know the Law (Jn 7: 49).
- Mark 7: 5: The scribes and the Pharisees criticize the behavior of Jesus' disciples. The scribes and Pharisees ask Jesus, zWhy do Your disciples not behave according to the tradition of the Ancients and eat the bread with impure hands? They think that they are interested in knowing the reason for the disciples' behavior. In reality, they criticize Jesus because He allows the disciples to transgress the norms of purity. The Pharisees formed a type of confraternity, the principal concern of which was to observe all the laws of purity. They were responsible for the doctrine. They taught the laws relative to the observance of purity.
- Mark 7: 6-13 Jesus criticizes the inconsistency of the Pharisees. Jesus answers quoting Isaiah: "This people approach me only in words, honors me only with lip service, while their hearts are far from me" (cf. Is 29: 13). Insisting on the norms of purity, the Pharisees emptied the content of the commandments of God's Law. Jesus quotes a concrete example. They said, "The person who offers his goods to the Temple cannot use these goods to help those in greater need." Thus, in the name of tradition they emptied the fourth commandment of its content, which commands to love father and mother. These people seem to be very observant, but they are only so externally. In their heart, they remain far away from God. As the hymn says, "His name is Jesus Christ and is hungry, and lives out on the sidewalk. And people when they pass by, sometimes do not stop, because they are afraid to arrive late to church!" At the time of Jesus, people in their wisdom were not in agreement with everything they were taught. They were hoping that one day the Messiah would come to indicate another way to attain purity. In Jesus this hope becomes a reality.

Personal Questions

- Do you know any religious tradition today which does not make much sense, but which continues to be taught?
- The Pharisees were practicing Jews, but their faith was divided, separated from the life of the people. This is why Jesus criticizes them. Would Jesus criticize us today? For what things?

Concluding Prayer

Our Lord, how majestic is Your name throughout the world! I look up at Your heavens, shaped by Your fingers,

at the moon and the stars You set firm— what are human beings that You spare a thought for them, or the child of Adam that you care for him? (Ps 8: 1, 3-4)

Wednesday, February 7, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father,

watch over Your family and keep us safe in Your care, for all our hope is in You.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, forever and ever. Amen.

Gospel reading - Mark 7: 14-23

Jesus summoned the crowd again and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand. Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; but the things that come out from within are what defile.” When he got home away from the crowd his disciples questioned him about the parable. He said to them, “Are even you likewise without understanding? Do you not realize that everything that goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters not the heart but the stomach and passes out into the latrine?” (Thus, he declared all foods clean.) “But what comes out of the man, that is what defiles him. From within the man, from his heart, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile.”

Reflection

The Gospel today is the continuation of the themes on which we meditated yesterday. Jesus helps the people and the disciples to understand better the significance of purity before God. For centuries, the Jews, in order not to contract impurity, observed many norms and customs bound to food, to drink, to dress, to hygiene of the body, to contact with persons of other races and religions, etc. (Mk 7: 3-4). For them it was forbidden to have contact with gentiles and to eat with them. In the '70's, the time of Mark, some converted Jews said, “Now that we are Christians we have to abandon these ancient customs which separate us from converted gentiles!” But others thought that they had to continue with the observance of these laws of purity (cf. Col 2: 16,20-22). The attitude of Jesus, described in today's Gospel, helps us to overcome this problem.

- Mark 7: 14-16: Jesus opens a new way to try to bring people closer to God. He says to the crowds, “Nothing that goes into someone from outside can make that person unclean; it is the things that come out of someone that make that person unclean (Mk 7: 15). Jesus overturns things: what is impure does not come from outside to the inside, as the Doctors of the Law taught, but what comes from inside to the outside. Thus, nobody ever needs to ask himself if this or that food is pure or impure. Jesus places what is pure and impure on another level, not on the level of ethical behavior.

He opens a new way to reach God, and in this way realizes the most profound design of the people. .

- Mark 7: 17-23: In the house, the disciples asked for an explanation. The disciples did not understand what Jesus wanted to say with that affirmation. When they reached the house, they ask for an explanation. The disciples' question surprises Jesus. He thought that they had understood the parable. In His explanation to the disciples He goes to the very bottom of the question of impurity. He declares that all food is pure! In other words, no food which enters into the human being from outside can make him become impure, because it does not go to the heart, but to the stomach and ends in the septic tank, but what makes one become impure, according to Jesus, is what comes out from within the heart to poison human relationships. And then He enumerates some of them: prostitution, murder, adultery, ambition, theft, etc. Thus, in many ways, by means of the word, of life together, of living close to one another, Jesus helps people to attain purity in another way. By means of the word He purified the lepers (Mk 1: 40-44), cast out unclean spirits (Mk 1: 26, 39; 3: 15, 22, etc.), and overcame death, which was the source of all impurity. Thanks to Jesus, who touches her, the woman who was excluded and considered impure is cured (Mk 5: 25-34). Without fear of being contaminated, Jesus eats together with people who were considered impure (Mk 2: 15-17).

The laws of purity at the time of Jesus. The people of that time were concerned very much about purity. The laws and the norms of purity indicated the necessary conditions to be able to place oneself before God and to feel well in His presence. One could not approach God in just any way, because God is holy. The Law stated, "Be holy because I am holy!" (Lv 19: 2). One who was not pure could not get close to God to receive the blessings promised to Abraham. The laws of what was pure and impure (Lv 11 to 16) were written after the time of slavery in Babylon, around the year 800 after the Exodus, but had its origin in the ancient mentality and customs of the people of the Bible. A religious and mystical vision of the world led people to appreciate things, people and animals, beginning from the category of purity (Gn 7: 2; Dt 14: 13-21; Nm 12: 10-15; Dt 24: 8-9).

In the context of the Persian domination, the fifth and fourth centuries before Christ, before the difficulties of reconstructing the Temple of Jerusalem and of the survival of the clergy, the priests who governed the people of the Bible increased the laws relative to poverty and obliged the people to offer sacrifices of purification for sin. Thus, after child birth (Lv 12: 1-8), menstruation (Lv 15: 19-24) the cure of a hemorrhage (Lv 15: 25-30), women had to offer sacrifices to recover purity. Lepers (Lv 13) or people who had contact with impure things or animals (Lv 5:1-13) also had to offer sacrifices. Part of this offering remained for the priests (Lv 5: 13). At the time of Jesus, to touch a leper, to eat with a tax collector or publican, to eat without washing your hands, and so many other activities rendered the person impure, and any contact with this person contaminated the others. For this reason, it was necessary to avoid an impure person. People lived with fear, always threatened by so many impure things which threatened life. They were obliged to live without trust, not trusting anything or anybody. Now, all of a sudden, everything changes! Through faith in Jesus, it was possible to have purity and to feel good before God without having to observe all those laws and those norms of the ancient tradition . It was liberation! The Good News announced by Jesus took away all fear from the people, and they no longer had to be in a defensive situation all the time, and He gives them back the desire to live, and the joy of being children of God, without fear of being happy!

Personal Questions

- In your life, are there any traditions which you consider sacred and others which you do not? Which ones? Why?
- In the name of the tradition of the ancients, the Pharisees refused the Commandment of Jesus. Does this happen today? Where and when? Does it also happen in my life?

Concluding Prayer

The upright have Yahweh for their Savior, their refuge in times of trouble;

Yahweh helps them and rescues them, He will rescue them from the wicked, and save them because they take refuge in Him. (Ps 37: 39-40)

Thursday, February 8, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father,

watch over Your family and keep us safe in Your care, for all our hope is in You.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, forever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 7: 24-30

Jesus went to the district of Tyre. He entered a house and wanted no one to know about it, but he could not escape notice. Soon a woman whose daughter had an unclean spirit heard about him. She came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Greek, a Syrophenician by birth, and she begged him to drive the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first. For it is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs." She replied and said to him, "Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's scraps." Then he said to her, "For saying this, you may go. The demon has gone out of your daughter." When the woman went home, she found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.

Reflection

In today's Gospel we see how Jesus is attentive to a foreign woman, belonging to another race and to another religion, even though this was forbidden by the religious law of that time. At the beginning Jesus did not want to help her, but the woman insists and obtains what she wants: the cure of her daughter.

Jesus is trying to broaden the mentality of the disciples and of the people beyond the traditional vision. In the multiplication of the loaves, He had insisted on sharing (Mk 6: 30-44). He had declared all food pure (Mk 7: 1-23). In this episode of the Canaanite woman, He exceeds, goes beyond the frontiers of the national territory and accepts a foreign woman who did not belong to the people and with whom it was forbidden to speak. These initiatives of Jesus, which come from His experience of God the Father,

were foreign to the mentality of the people of that time; Jesus helps the people to get out of their way of experiencing God in life.

- Mark 7: 24: Jesus gets out of that territory. In the Gospel yesterday (Mk 7: 14-23) and of the day before (Mk 7: 1-13), Jesus had criticized the incoherence of the tradition of the ancients and had helped the people and the disciples to get out of the prison of the laws of purity. Here, in Mark 7: 24, He leaves Galilee. He seems to want to get out from the prison of territory and race. Finding Himself outside, He does not want to be recognized. But His fame had reached there before. People had recourse to Jesus.
- Mark 7: 25-26: The situation. A woman approaches Jesus and begins to ask for help for her daughter who is sick. Mark says explicitly that she belongs to another race and to another religion. That means that she was a gentile. She throws herself at the feet of Jesus and begins to plead for the cure of her daughter, who was possessed by an unclean spirit. For the gentiles it was not a problem to go to Jesus. But for the Jews to live with gentiles was a problem!
- Mark 7: 27: The response of Jesus. Faithful to the norms of His religion, Jesus says that it is not appropriate to take the bread of the children and give it to little dogs! This was a hard phrase. The comparison came from life in the family. Even now, children and dogs are numerous, especially in poor neighborhoods. Jesus affirms one thing: no mother takes away bread from the mouth of her children to give it to the dogs. In this case the children were the Hebrew people and the little dogs, the gentiles. At the time of the Old Testament, because of rivalry among the people, the people used to call other people dogs (1 Sam 17: 43). In the other Gospels, Jesus explains the reason for His refusal: "I have been sent only for the lost sheep of the house of Israel!" (Mt 15: 24). In other words, the Father does not want Me to take care of this woman!
- Mark 7: 28: The reaction of the woman. She agrees with Jesus, but she extends the comparison and applies it to her case: Jesus, this is true, but the little dogs also eat the crumbs that fall from the table of the children! It is as if she said, "If I am a little dog, then I have the right of little dogs, that is, the crumbs that fall from the table belong to me!" She simply draws conclusions from the parable that Jesus told and shows that even in the house of Jesus, the little dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table of the children. And in the house of Jesus, that is, in the Christian community, the multiplication of the bread for the children was so abundant that there were twelve baskets full left over (Mk 6: 42) for the little dogs, that is, for her, for the gentiles!
- Mark 7: 29-30: The reaction of Jesus: "Because of what you have said, go. The devil has gone out of your daughter!" In the other Gospels it is made more explicit: "Great is your faith! May it be done as you wish!" (Mt 15: 28). If Jesus accepts the woman's request, it is because He understands that now the Father wanted Him to accept her request. This episode helps us to understand something of the mystery which envelops the person of Jesus and His life with the Father. Observing the reactions and the attitudes of the people, Jesus discovers the will of the Father in the events of life. The attitude of the woman opens a new horizon in the life of Jesus. Thanks to her, He discovers better the project of the Father for all those who seek to liberate themselves from the chains which imprison their energy. Thus, throughout the pages of the Gospel of Mark, there is a growing opening toward the people. In this way, Mark leads the readers to open themselves before the reality of the world which surrounds them and to overcome the preconceptions which prevent a peaceful living together among the people. This opening toward gentiles appears very clearly

in the final order given by Jesus to the disciples, after His Resurrection: "Go out to the whole world, proclaim the Gospel to all creation" (Mk 16: 15).

Personal Questions

- Concretely, what do you do to live peacefully with people of other Christian Churches? In the neighborhood where you live, are there people of other religions? Which?
- Do you normally speak with people of other religions? What kind of broadening of mind does this text demand from us today, in the family and in the community?

Concluding Prayer

Blessed are those who keep to what is just, whose conduct is always upright!

Remember me, Yahweh, in Your love for Your people. Come near to me with Your saving power. (Ps 106: 3-4)

Friday, February 9, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father,

watch over Your family and keep us safe in Your care, for all our hope is in You.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, forever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 7: 31-37

Jesus left the district of Tyre and went by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, into the district of the Decapolis. And people brought to him a deaf man who had a speech impediment and begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him off by himself away from the crowd. He put his finger into the man's ears and, spitting, touched his tongue; then he looked up to heaven and groaned, and said to him, "*Ephphatha!*" (that is, "Be opened!") And immediately the man's ears were opened, his speech impediment was removed, and he spoke plainly. He ordered them not to tell anyone. But the more he ordered them not to, the more they proclaimed it. They were exceedingly astonished, and they said, "He has done all things well. He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

Reflection

In today's Gospel, Jesus cures a deaf-mute. This episode is not known very much. In the episode of the Canaanite woman, Jesus goes beyond the frontiers of the national territory and accepts a foreign woman who does not belong to the people and with whom it was forbidden to speak. In today's Gospel we notice this same opening.

- Mark 7: 31. The region of the Decapolis. At that time, returning from the territory of Tyre, Jesus went to Sidon toward the Lake of Galilee, right through the Decapolis

territory. Decapolis literally means “ten cities.” This was a region of ten cities in the southeast part of Galilee, and its population was gentile.

- Mark 7: 31-35. To open the ears and to loosen the tongue. A deaf-mute man was brought before Jesus. People wanted Jesus to place His hands on him. But Jesus goes far beyond this request. He leads the man aside from the crowd, puts His finger into the man’s ears and touches his tongue with spittle. Looking up to Heaven, He sighed deeply and said, “*Ephphatha!*” that is, “Be opened!” At that same moment, his ears were opened, and at once the impediment of his tongue was loosened and he spoke clearly. Jesus wants the people to open their ears and to loosen their tongues!
- Mark 7: 36-37: Jesus wants no publicity. And He ordered them not to tell anyone about it, but the more He insisted, the more widely they proclaimed it. Their admiration was unbounded and they said, “Everything He does is good; He makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak.” He prohibits that the cure be proclaimed, but in fact that does not happen. Those who have experienced what Jesus has done go and tell others, whether Jesus wants it or not! The people who were present at the cure began to proclaim what they had seen and summarize the Good News as follows: Everything He does is good; He makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak! This affirmation of the people makes us remember creation, when it was said, “God saw that everything was good!” (Gen 1: 31). And this also recalls the prophecy of Isaiah, where he says that in the future the deaf will hear and the dumb will speak (Is 29: 28; 35: 5, cf. Mt 11: 5).

The recommendation not to tell anybody. Sometimes, the attention which Mark’s Gospel attributes to the prohibition of Jesus to proclaim the cure is exaggerated, as if Jesus had some secret that He wanted to keep. In the majority of cases in which Jesus works a miracle, He does not ask for silence. Rather, He once even asked for publicity (Mk 5: 19). Sometimes, He orders not to announce the healing (Mk 1: 44; 5: 43; 7: 36; 8: 26), but obtains the opposite result. The more He prohibits it, the more the Good News is proclaimed (Mk 1: 28, 45; 3: 7-8; 7: 36-37). It is useless to prohibit! The interior force of the Good News is so great that it spreads by itself.

Growing openness in the Gospel of Mark. Throughout the pages of Mark’s Gospel, there is a growing openness toward the other populations. Thus Mark leads the readers to open themselves toward the reality of the world around and to overcome the preconceptions which prevent peaceful co-existence among the different populations. When He passed through the Decapolis, a gentile region, Jesus responded to the request of the people of the place and cured a deaf-mute man. He is not afraid to be contaminated with the impurity of a gentile, because in curing him, He touches his ears and his tongue. Two Jews and the disciples themselves have difficulty hearing and understanding that a gentile who was deaf and dumb can now hear and speak thanks to Jesus who touched him. It recalls the Song of the Servant, “The Lord God has opened the ears, and I listen to Him” (Is 50: 4-5). In driving the merchants out of the Temple, Jesus criticizes the unjust trade and affirms that the Temple should be a house of prayer for all peoples (Mk 11: 17). In the parable of the wicked tenants, Mark refers to the fact that the message will be taken away from the chosen people, the Jews, and will be given to others, the gentiles (Mk 12: 1-12). After the death of Jesus, Mark presents the profession of faith of a gentile at the foot of the Cross. In quoting the Roman centurion and how he recognizes the Son of God in Jesus, Mark is saying that the gentile is more faithful than the disciples and more faithful than the Jews (Mk 15: 39). The openness to the gentiles appears very clearly in the final order given by Jesus to the disciples, after His Resurrection: “Go out to the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to all creation” (Mk 16: 15).

Personal Questions

- Jesus shows a great openness toward people of another race, another religion and of other customs. We Christians, today, do we have the same openness? Do I have this openness?
- Definition of the Good News: Everything Jesus does is good! Am I good News for others?

Concluding Prayer

Sing a new song to Yahweh! Sing to Yahweh, all the earth!

Sing to Yahweh, bless His name! (Ps 96: 1-2)

Saturday, February 10, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father,

watch over Your family and keep us safe in Your care, for all our hope is in You.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, forever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 8: 1-10

In those days when there again was a great crowd without anything to eat, Jesus summoned the disciples and said, "My heart is moved with pity for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will collapse on the way, and some of them have come a great distance." His disciples answered him, "Where can anyone get enough bread to satisfy them here in this deserted place?"

Still he asked them, "How many loaves do you have?" They replied, "Seven." He ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground. Then, taking the seven loaves he gave thanks, broke them, and gave them to his disciples to distribute, and they distributed them to the crowd. They also had a few fish. He said the blessing over them and ordered them distributed also. They ate and were satisfied. They picked up the fragments left over—seven baskets. There were about four thousand people. He dismissed the crowd and got into the boat with his disciples and came to the region of Dalmanutha.

Reflection

The Gospel today speaks about the second multiplication of the loaves. The unitive thread of several episodes in this part of the Gospel of Mark is the food, the bread. After the banquet of death (Mk 6: 17-29), comes the banquet of life (Mk 6: 30-44). During the crossing of the Lake the disciples are afraid, because they have understood nothing of the bread multiplied in the desert (Mk 6: 51-52). Then Jesus declares that all food is pure (Mk 7: 1-23). In Jesus' conversation with the Canaanite woman, the gentiles ate the

crumbs which fell from the table of the children (Mk 7: 24-30). And here, in today's Gospel, Mark speaks about the second multiplication of the loaves (Mk 8: 1-10).

- Mark 8: 1-3: The situation of the people and the reaction of Jesus. The crowds who gathered around Jesus in the desert had no food to eat. Jesus calls the disciples and presents the problem to them: I feel pity for this people, because for three days they have been following Me and have not eaten. If I send them away to their homes without eating, they will faint on the way; and some came from very far! In Jesus' concern there are two important things: a) People forget home and food and follow Jesus to the desert! This is a sign that Jesus aroused great sympathy, up to the point that people followed Him into the desert and remained with Him three days! b) Jesus does not ask them to solve the problem. He only expresses His concern to the disciples. It seems to be a problem without a solution.
- Mark 8: 4: The reaction of the disciples: the first misunderstanding. The disciples then think of a solution, according to which someone had to bring bread for the people. It does not even occur to them that the solution could come from the people themselves. They say: And how could we feed all these people in the desert? In other words, they think of a traditional solution. Someone has to find the money, buy bread and distribute it to the people. They themselves perceive that, in that desert, to buy bread, this solution is not possible, but they see no other possibility to solve the problem. That is, if Jesus insists in not sending the people back to their homes, there will be no way to feed them!
- Mark 8: 5-7: The solution found by Jesus. First of all, He asks how much bread they have: seven loaves! Then He orders the people to sit down. Then, He takes those seven loaves of bread, gives thanks, breaks them and gives them to the disciples to distribute; and they distribute them to the crowds. And He does the same thing with the fish. As in the first multiplication (Mk 6: 41), the way in which Mark describes Jesus' attitude, recalls the Eucharist. The message is this: participation in the Eucharist should lead to the gift and to the sharing of bread with those who have no bread.
- Mark 8: 8-10: The result: Everyone ate, they were satisfied, and bread was left over! This was an unexpected solution, which began within the people, with the few loaves of bread that they had brought! In the first multiplication, twelve baskets of bread were leftover: here, seven. In the first one, they served five thousand people. Here four thousand. In the first one there were five loaves of bread and two fish. Here, seven loaves of bread and a few fish.
- The time of the dominant ideology. The disciples thought one way, Jesus thinks in another way. In the way of thinking of the disciples there is the dominant ideology, the common way of thinking of people. Jesus thinks in a different way. It is not by going with Jesus and living in a community that a person is already a saint and renewed. Among the disciples, the old mentality always emerges again, because the leaven of Herod and of the Pharisees (Mk 8: 15), that is, the dominant ideology, had profound roots in the life of those people. The conversion requested by Jesus is a deep conversion. He wants to uproot the various types of leaven.

The leaven of the community closed up in itself, without any openness. Jesus responds: The one who is not against is in favor! (Mk 9: 39-40). For Jesus, what is important is not if the person forms part of the community or not, but if he/she is generous, available or not to do the good which the community has to do.

The leaven of the group which considers itself superior to others. Jesus responds: You do not know what spirit animates you (Lk 9: 55).

The leaven of the mentality of class and of competition, which characterized the society of the Roman Empire and which permeated the small community which was just beginning. Jesus responds: Let the first one be the last one (Mk 9: 35). This is the point on which He insists the most; it is the strongest point of His witness: "I have not come to be served, but to serve" (Mk 10: 45; Mt 20: 28; Jn 13: 1-16).

The leaven of the mentality of the culture of the time. Jesus responds: Allow the little ones to come to me! Jesus indicates that the little ones are the models of discipleship for adults: anyone who does not accept the kingdom of God as a child will not enter it (Lk 18: 17).

The reading of the Gospel, done in community, can help us to change life and the vision and can help us to continue to convert ourselves and to be faithful to the words of Jesus.

Personal Questions

- We can always encounter misunderstandings with friends and enemies. What is the misunderstanding between Jesus and the disciples on the occasion of the multiplication of the loaves? How does Jesus face this misunderstanding?
- In your house, with your neighbors or in the community, have there been misunderstandings? How have you reacted?
- Has your community had misunderstandings or conflicts with the civil or ecclesiastical authority? How did this happen?
- What is the leaven which today prevents the realization of the Gospel and should be eliminated?

Concluding Prayer

Lord, You have been our refuge from age to age. Before the mountains were born, before the earth and the world came to birth, from eternity to eternity You are God. (Ps 90: 1-2)

Sunday, February 11, 2024

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

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

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

Gospel Reading – Mark 1: 40-45

A Key to the Reading:

The Gospel of this sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time tells us how Jesus receives a leper. In those days, lepers were the most excluded people of society, avoided by all. Lepers could not take part in anything. In olden days, the lack of effective medicines, the fear of contagion and the necessity of defending the life of society led people to isolate and exclude lepers. Besides, among the people of God whose defense of the gift of life was one of the most sacred duties, they thought that the exclusion of lepers was a divine duty because it was the only way to defend the community from deadly contagion. Thus, in Israel, the leper felt impure and excluded not only by society, but even by God (cf. Lev 14: 1-32). Gradually, however, as better remedies came to light and, above all, thanks to the deep experience communicated to us by Jesus concerning God our Father, lepers began to be accepted and reintegrated as brothers and sisters in human society.

In spite of two thousand years of Christianity, the exclusion and marginalization of some categories of people goes on even today, whether in society or in the Church. For instance, those suffering from AIDS, migrants, homosexuals, divorced persons, etc. Today, in your society and in the Church, what are the categories of excluded and avoided people? With these questions in mind, let us read and meditate on the Gospel for this Sunday.

A Division of the Text:

- Mark 1: 40: The state of abandonment and exclusion of a leper
- Mark 1: 41-42: Jesus welcomes and heals the leper
- Mark 1: 43-44: Reintroducing those excluded into fraternal society
- Mark 1: 45: The leper proclaims the good Jesus did to him, and Jesus becomes an excluded person

Text:

A leper came to Jesus and kneeling down begged Him and said, "If you wish, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, he stretched out His hand, touched him, and said to him, "I do will it. Be made clean." The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean. Then, warning him sternly, He dismissed him at once. He said to him, "See that you tell no one anything, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them."

The man went away and began to publicize the whole matter. He spread the report abroad so that it was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly. He remained outside in deserted places, and people kept coming to Him from everywhere.

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

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

Some Questions

to help us in our personal reflection.

- What did you like best and what touched you most in this text? Why?
- How does this text express the exclusion of lepers?
- How does Jesus welcome, heal and reinstate the leper? Try to observe each detail carefully.
- How can we, today, imitate Jesus' attitude towards those excluded?

To go deeper into the theme

The Context of Then and of Today:

Whether in the 70's, when Mark was writing, or today in our times, it was and still is very important to hold to some criteria or models to know how to live and proclaim the Good News of God and how to carry out our mission as Christians. In verses 16 to 45 of the first chapter of Mark, in gathering together eight episodes, describes how Jesus proclaimed the Good News. Each episode contains the criterion for the community of His time, so that people then could examine their own mission. This Sunday's text makes concrete the eighth criterion: reinstating those excluded. Here is the overall scheme to clarify what follows:

- Scripture Text
Activities of Jesus – Aim of the Good News
- Mark 1: 16-20
Jesus calls His first disciples forming community
- Mark 1: 21-22
The people are amazed at His teaching creating a critical conscience
- Mark 1: 23-28
Jesus drives out an evil spirit fighting against the power of evil
- Mark 1:29-31
The healing of Peter's mother-in-law restoring life through service
- Mark 1: 32-34
The healing of the sick and those possessed by devils welcoming the marginalized
- Mark 1: 35
Jesus gets up to pray while it is still dark staying united with the Father
- Mark 1: 36-39
Jesus goes on proclaiming the Good News not allowing results to stop us
- Mark 1: 40-45
Jesus heals a leper reinstating those excluded

A Commentary on the Text:

- Mark 1: 40: The state of abandonment and exclusion of a leper
A leper approaches Jesus. He was an excluded man, impure! He was to be sent away from human society. Anyone who came close to him would also be impure. But the

leper had much courage. He broke the rules of religion so as to approach Jesus. He says, "If You are willing, You can cleanse me!" In other words, "There is no need for You to touch me! If You are just willing that is enough to heal me!" This sentence reveals two evils: 1) the evil of the disease called leprosy that made him impure; 2) the evil of solitude to which he was condemned by society and religion. It also reveals the great faith people had in the power of Jesus.

- Mark 1: 41-42: By receiving and healing the leper, Jesus reveals a new face of God. Deeply compassionate, Jesus heals both evils. Firstly, to heal the evil of solitude, He touches the leper. It is as though He says to him, "For Me you are not an outcast. I welcome you as a brother!" Secondly, He heals the disease called leprosy, saying, "I am willing. Be cleansed!" In order to come into contact with Jesus, the leper had broken the rules of the law. For Jesus to be able to help this excluded one and thus reveal a new face of God, He breaks the laws of His religion and touches the leper. In those days, anyone who touched a leper became impure in the sight of the religious authorities and before the law of that time.

- Mark 1: 43-44: Reinstating those excluded into fraternal life

Not only does Jesus heal, but He wills that the healed person be able to live with others. Reinstating a person to society. In those days, for a leper to be received within the community, he or she had to have a declaration of healing from a priest. Thus it was written in the law concerning the purification of a leper (Lev 14:1-32). This still happens today. The sick person leaves the hospital with a letter signed by the doctor of a particular section. Jesus obliges the leper to get the document from the competent authority so that he may be reinstated into normal society. He is thus obliging the authorities to confirm that the man has been healed.

- Mark 1: 45: The leper proclaims the good that Jesus worked for him and Jesus becomes excluded.

Jesus had forbidden the leper from speaking of his healing. But the leper did speak. The leper started freely proclaiming the story everywhere, so that Jesus could no longer go openly into any town, but stayed away in desert places. Why did Jesus stay away in desert places? Jesus had touched the leper. Thus, according to opinion in those days, now He was impure and had to live away from all. He could not enter any city. But Mark implies that people did not much care about official rules, because people from all around kept coming to Him! A complete turn around!

The double news that Mark conveys to the communities of his time and to all of us is this:

1) that proclaiming the Good News means witnessing to the concrete experience that one has of Jesus. What does the leper proclaim? He proclaims to others the good that Jesus did to him. That's all! And it is precisely this witness that drives others to accept the Good News that Jesus proclaims. Anyone who has no experience of Jesus will have little to proclaim to others.

2) To take the Good News to others one need not fear breaking religious rules that are contrary to God's plan and that render communication, dialogue and a life of love difficult, even if such an attitude may create difficulties for people as it did for Jesus!

Further Information:

The eight criteria for evaluating the mission of the community

A double slavery marked the situation of people at the time of Jesus: the slavery of the official religion, upheld by the religious authorities of the time, and the slavery of Herod's politics, upheld by the Roman Empire and supported by the whole organized system of exploitation and repression. Because of all this, many of the people were excluded by religion and by society: the very contrary of the fraternity that God dreamt of for all! And it is precisely in this context that Jesus begins to carry out His mission of proclaiming the Good News of God.

This Sunday's Gospel is part of a broader literary unit (Mk 1: 16-45). Apart from the description of the preparation of the Good News (Mk 1: 1-13) and of the proclamation (Mk 1: 14-15), Mark brings together eight activities of Jesus to describe His mission of proclamation of the Good News and to describe how the mission of the community should be (Mk 1: 16-45). This is the same mission that Jesus received from the Father (Jn 20: 21). Mark puts together these episodes, which were passed on orally in the communities, and links them together like old bricks in a new wall. These eight episodes are eight criteria that serve the community to revise and check whether they are carrying out their mission well. Let us see:

- Mk 1: 16-20: Creating community.

The first thing that Jesus does is to call people to follow Him. A fundamental task of mission is to gather people around Jesus in order to create community.

- Mk 1: 21-22: Creating a critical conscience.

The first thing that people see is the difference between the teaching of Jesus and that of the . Part of mission is to create a critical conscience in people, even in the face of the official religion.

- Mk 1: 23-28: Fighting the power of evil.

Jesus' first miracle is the driving out of an impure spirit. Part of mission is fighting the power of evil that destroys life and alienates people from themselves.

- Mk 1: 29-31: Restoring life through service.

Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law, and she gets up and begins to serve. Part of mission is the care of the sick, so that they may be able to get up and once more serve others.

- Mk 1: 32-34: Welcoming the marginalized

After the Sabbath, people bring to Jesus the sick and the possessed that He may heal them, and, by laying His hands, He heals them all. Part of mission is to welcome the marginalized.

- Mk 1: 35: Staying united with the Father through prayer.

After a day of labor that extends far into the night, Jesus gets up quickly so that He may pray in a desert place. Part of mission is staying united with the source of the Good News, that is, the Father, through prayer.

- Mk 1: 36-39: Keeping up an awareness of mission.

The disciples were happy with the results and wanted Jesus to return. But He carried on with His journey. Part of mission is not to be content with results, but to keep alive an awareness of mission.

- Mk 1: 40-45: Reinstating the marginalized into human society.

Jesus heals a leper and asks him to present himself to a priest so that he may be declared healed and may be able to live among people. Part of mission is reinstating the excluded to human society.

These eight points, so well chosen by Mark, indicate the purpose of Jesus' mission: "I came that all may have life, and may have it abundantly!" (Jn 10: 10). These same eight points may serve to evaluate our own community. Thus, we can see how Mark built up his Gospel - a beautiful structure that keeps in mind two things at once:

(1) it informs people of what Jesus did and taught;

(2) and it forms the community and people in the mission of proclaimers of the Good News of God.

Praying a Psalm: Psalm 125 (124)

Anyone who trusts in the Lord will not waver!

Whoever trusts in Yahweh is like Mount Zion: unshakable, it stands for ever.

Jerusalem! The mountains encircle her: so Yahweh encircles His people, henceforth and forever.

The scepter of the wicked will not come to rest over the heritage of the upright; or the upright might set their own hands to evil.

Do good, Yahweh, to those who are good, to the sincere at heart.

But the crooked, the twisted, turn them away, Yahweh, with evil-doers. Peace to Israel!

Final Prayer

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

Monday, February 12, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Lord God,

forgive us that in our weak faith we ask sometimes for signs and wonders. We know that You are our Father, but it is not always easy for us to recognize Your loving presence.

Give us eyes of faith to see the sign that You are with us in Jesus and His message. We say so reluctantly, for it is painful.

Purify our trust in You and in Jesus that we may become more mature Christians, who love You through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 8: 11-13

The Pharisees came forward and began to argue with Jesus, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him. He sighed from the depth of his spirit and said, "Why does this generation seek a sign? Amen, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation." Then he left them, got into the boat again, and went off to the other shore.

Reflection

Mark 8: 11-13: The Pharisees ask for a sign from Heaven. Today's Gospel narrates a discussion of the Pharisees with Jesus. Jesus also, as it happened with Moses in the Old Testament, had fed hungry people in the desert, by multiplying the bread (Mk 8: 1-10). This is a sign that He presented himself before the people as a new Moses. But the Pharisees were not capable of perceiving the meaning of the multiplication of the loaves. They continued to discuss with Jesus and ask for a sign from Heaven. They had understood nothing of all that Jesus had done. Jesus sighed profoundly, probably feeling disgust and sadness before so much blindness. He concludes by saying, "No sign will be given to this generation." He left them and went toward the other side of the lake. It is useless to show a beautiful picture to one who does not want to open his eyes. People who close their eyes cannot see!

The danger of dominating ideology. Here we can clearly perceive how the yeast of Herod and the Pharisees (Mk 8: 15), the dominating ideology of the time, made people lose their capacity to analyze events objectively. This yeast came from afar and had sunk profound roots in the life of the people. It went so far as to contaminate the disciples' mentality and manifested itself in many ways. With the formation which Jesus gave them, He tried to uproot this yeast.

The following are some examples of this fraternal help which Jesus gave to His disciples:

- The mentality of a closed group. On a certain day a person not belonging to the community used the name of Jesus to drive out devils. John saw this and forbade it: "We tried to stop him because he was not one of ours" (Mk 9: 38). John thought he had the monopoly on Jesus and wanted to prevent others from using the name of Jesus to do good. John wanted a community closed in upon itself. It was the yeast of the Elected People, the separated People! Jesus responds, "Do not stop him! Anyone who is not against us is for us!" (Mk 9: 39-40).
- The mentality of a group which considers itself superior to others. At times, the Samaritans did not want to offer hospitality to Jesus. The reaction of some of the disciples was immediate: "May fire descend from heaven and burn them up!" (Lk 9: 54). They thought that because they were with Jesus, everyone had to welcome Him, to accept Him. They thought they had God on their side to defend Him. It was the yeast of the Chosen People, the Privileged People! Jesus reproaches them: "Jesus turned and rebuked them" (Lk 9: 55).
- The mentality of competition and prestige. The disciples discussed among themselves about the first place (Mk 9: 33-34). It was the yeast of class and of competitiveness, which characterized the official religion and the society of the Roman Empire. It was already getting into the small community around Jesus. Jesus reacts and orders them to have a contrary mentality: "If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last" (Mk 9: 35).

- The mentality of those who marginalize the little ones. The disciples scolded little children. It was the yeast of the mentality of that time, according to which children did not count and should be disciplined by adults. Jesus rebukes the disciples: "Let the little children come to me!" (Mk 10: 14). The children become the teachers of the adults: Anyone who does not welcome the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. (Lk 18: 17).

As it happened in the time of Jesus, today also the dominating ideology arises once again and appears even in the life of the community and of the family. The prayerful reading of the Gospel, done in community, can help to change our view of things and to deepen in us conversion and the fidelity which Jesus asks from us.

For Personal Confrontation

Faced with the alternative either to have faith in Jesus or to ask for a sign from heaven, the Pharisees want a sign from heaven. They were not able to believe in Jesus. The same thing happens to me. What have I chosen?

The yeast of the Pharisees prevented the disciples from perceiving the presence of the Kingdom in Jesus. Has some residue of this yeast of the Pharisees remained in me?

Concluding Prayer

Lord, You are generous and act generously; teach me Your will. (Ps 119: 68)

Tuesday, February 13, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,

when we do not see clearly in life, when suffering comes our way, we tend to blame You or people.

Help us to realize clearly how much of the evil around us comes from within ourselves: from our greed for riches and power, from our self-complacency and selfishness.

Speak to us Your word of forgiveness and change us from a silent majority of evil into solidarity of love, by the grace of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Mark 8: 14-21

The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. Jesus enjoined them, "Watch out, guard against the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." They concluded among themselves that it was because they had no bread. When he became aware of this he said to them, "Why do you conclude that it is because you have no bread? Do you not yet understand or comprehend? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes and not see, ears and not hear? And do you not remember, when I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many wicker baskets full of fragments you picked up?" They answered Him, "Twelve." "When I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many full baskets of fragments did you pick up?" They answered Him, "Seven." He said to them, "Do you still not understand?"

Reflection

Yesterday's Gospel spoke of the misunderstanding between Jesus and the Pharisees. Today's Gospel speaks of the misunderstanding between Jesus and the disciples and shows that the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod (religion and government), had taken possession of the mentality of the disciples to the point of hindering them from listening to the Good News.

- Mark 8: 14-16: Attention to the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod. Jesus warns the disciples to look out for the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod. But they do not understand the words of Jesus. They think that He is speaking like that because they forgot to buy bread. Jesus says one thing and they understood another. This clash was the result of the insidious influence of the yeast of the Pharisees on the mentality and on the life of the disciples.
- Mark 8: 17-18a: Jesus' question. In the face of this almost total lack of perception in the disciples, Jesus rapidly asks them a series of questions, without waiting for an answer. They are hard questions which express very serious things and reveal the total lack of understanding on the part of the disciples. Even if it seems unbelievable, the disciples reach the point in which there is no difference between them and the enemies of Jesus. First, Jesus had become sad seeing the hardness of heart of the Pharisees and of the Herodians (Mk 3: 5). Now, the disciples themselves have hardened their hearts (Mk 8: 17). First, those outside (Mk 4:11) do not understand the parables because they have eyes and do not see, listen but do not understand (Mk 4:12). Now, the disciples themselves understand nothing, because they have eyes and do not see, listen, but do not understand (Mk 8:18). Besides, the image of the hardened heart evoked the hardness of heart of the people of the Old Testament who always drifted away from the path. It also evoked the hardened heart of Pharaoh who oppressed and persecuted the people (Ex 4: 21; 7: 13; 8: 11, 15, 28; 9: 7). The expression "they have eyes and do not see, listen but do not understand" evoked not only the people without faith criticized by Isaiah (Is 6: 9-10), but also the adorers of false gods, of whom the psalm says, "They have eyes and see nothing, have ears and hear nothing" (Ps 115: 5-6).
- Mark 8: 18b-21: The two questions regarding the bread. The two final questions refer to the multiplication of the loaves: How many baskets did they gather the first time? Twelve! And the second time? Seven! Like the Pharisees, the disciples also, though they had collaborated actively in the multiplication of the loaves, did not succeed in understanding the meaning. Jesus ends by saying, "Do you still not understand?" The way in which Jesus asks these questions, one after the other, almost without waiting for an answer, seems to cut the conversation. It reveals a very big clash. What is the cause of this clash?
- The cause of the clash between Jesus and the disciples. The cause of the clash between Jesus and the disciples was not due to ill will on their part. The disciples were not like the Pharisees. The Pharisees did not understand, but in them there was malice. They used religion to criticize and to condemn Jesus (Mk 2: 7, 16, 18, 24; 3: 5, 22-30). The disciples were good people. Theirs was not ill will, because even if they were victims of the yeast of the Pharisees and of the Herodians, they were not interested in defending the system of the Pharisees and the Herodians against Jesus. Then, what was the cause? The cause of the clash between Jesus and the disciples had something to do with the Messianic hope. Firstly, among the Jews there was an enormous variety of Messianic expectations. Second, the diverse interpretations of the prophecies: there were people who expected a Messiah King (cf. Mk 15: 9, 32);

others, a Messiah Saint or Priest (cf. Mk1: 24); others, a Messiah subversive Warrior (cf. Lk 23: 5; Mk 15: 6; 13: 6-8); others, a Messiah Doctor (cf. Jn 4: 25; Mk 1: 22-27); still others, a Messiah Judge (cf. Lk 3: 5-9; Mk 1:8); others, a Messiah Prophet (6: 4, 14, 65). It seems that nobody expected a Messiah Servant, announced by the Prophet Isaiah (Is 42: 1; 49: 3; 52: 13). They did not consider the messianic hope as a service of the people of God to humanity. Each group, according to their own interests and according to their social class, awaited the Messiah, but wanted to reduce Him to their own hope. This is why the title Messiah, according to the person or social position, could mean very different things. There was a great confusion of ideas! And precisely in this attitude of Servant is found the key which turns on a light in the disciples' darkness and helps them toward conversion. It is only in accepting the Messiah as the Suffering Servant in Isaiah, that they will be capable of opening their eyes and understanding the Mystery of God in Jesus.

For Personal Confrontation

What is for us today the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod? What does it mean today for me to have a hardened heart?

The yeast of Herod and the Pharisees prevents the disciples from understanding the Good News. Perhaps, today the propaganda of television prevents us from understanding the Good News of Jesus?

Concluding Prayer

I need only say, "I am slipping," for Your faithful love, Yahweh, to support me; however great the anxiety of my heart, Your consolations soothe me. (Ps 94: 18-19)

Wednesday, February 14, 2024

Ash Wednesday

Opening Prayer

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

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

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

A Key to the Reading:

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

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

A Division of the Text:

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

Text:

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

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

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

Some Questions

to help us in our personal reflection.

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

To Go Deeper into the Theme

The Context:

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

A Commentary on the Text:

- Matthew 6: 1: A General Key to the Teaching that Follows

Jesus says, "Be careful not to parade your uprightness in public to attract attention; otherwise you will lose all reward from your Father in heaven." The justice referred to by Jesus is the place where God wants us to be. The way there is found in the Law of God. Jesus warns that it is not enough to observe the law so as to be praised by people. Earlier He had said, "For I tell you, if your uprightness does not surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of Heaven" (Mt 5: 26). In reading these words we must not only think of the Pharisees of Jesus time, but above all of the Pharisee that is dormant in each one of us. Had Joseph, Mary's spouse, followed the justice of the law of the Pharisees, he would have had to renounce Mary. But he was just (Mt 1: 19), and already possessed the new justice proclaimed by Jesus. That is why he broke the ancient law and saved Mary's and Jesus' lives. The new justice proclaimed by Jesus rests on another foundation, springs from another source. We must build our peace from the inside, not in what we do for God, but in what God does for us. This is the general key to an understanding of the teaching of Jesus on the works of mercy. In what follows, Matthew applies this general principle to the practice of almsgiving, prayer and fasting. Didactically, he first expresses what must not be and then immediately teaches what should be.

- Matthew 6:2: How Not to Go about Almsgiving

The wrong way of giving alms, then and now, is that of doing it in public so as to be acknowledged and acclaimed by others. We often see on pews of churches the words: Gift of such-and-such a family. On television, politicians love to appear as great benefactors of humanity on occasions of inaugurations of public works at the service of the community. Jesus says, "Those who act thus have already had their reward." Matthew 6: 3-4: How to go about almsgiving

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

- Matthew 6: 5: How Not to Pray

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

- Matthew 6: 6: How to Pray

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

- Matthew 6: 16: How Not to Fast

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

- Matthew 6: 17-18: How to Fast

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

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

Further Information:

The Broader Context of Matthew's Gospel

Matthew's Gospel was written for a community of converted Jews who were experiencing a deep crisis of identity in relation to their past. After their conversion to Jesus, they continued to live according to their old traditions and frequented the synagogue, together with their relatives and friends, just as before. But they suffered because of the strong pressure from their Jewish friends who did not accept Jesus as the Messiah. This tension grew after the year 70 AD. When in 66 AD the revolt of the Jews against Rome broke out, two groups refused to take part, the Pharisees and the Jewish Christians. Both groups held that going against Rome had nothing to do with the coming of the Messiah, as some thought. After the destruction of Jerusalem by the

Romans in the year 70, all the other Jewish groups disappeared. Only the Pharisees and the Jewish Christians remained. Both groups claimed to be the heirs of the promise of the prophets and, thus, the tension grew between brothers, because of the inheritance. The Pharisees reorganized the rest of the people and took an ever-stronger position against the Christians, who ended by being excommunicated from the synagogues. This excommunication rekindled the whole problem of identity. Now the Christians were officially and formally separated from the people of the promise. They could no longer frequent their synagogue, their rabbis. And they asked themselves, "Who are the real people of God: they or us? On whose side is God? Is Jesus really the Messiah?"

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

A Key to the Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount is the first of five sermons in Matthew's Gospel. It describes the conditions that will allow a person to enter the Kingdom of God: the way in, the new reading of the law, the new way of looking at and practicing the works of mercy; the new way of living in community. In a word, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus communicates the new way of looking at the things of Life and the Kingdom. The following is a division that serves as a key to reading:

- Mt 5: 1-16: The way in
- Mt 5 :1-10: The eight Beatitudes help us to see where the kingdom is already present (among the poor and persecuted) and where it will be soon (among the other six groups). Mt 5: 12-16: Jesus addresses His words of consolation to His disciples and warns that anyone who lives the beatitudes will be persecuted (Mt 5: 11-12), but his or her life will have meaning because he/she will be the salt of the earth (Mt 5: 13) and the light of the world (Mt 5: 14-16).
- Mt 5: 17 to 6: 1 8: The new relationship with God: A new Justice
- Mt 5: 17-48: The new justice must be greater than that of the Pharisees

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

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

- Mt 6: 1-18: The new justice must not seek reward or merit (This is the Gospel of this Ash Wednesday).
- Mt 6: 19-34: The new relationship to the goods of this world: a new vision of creation Jesus comes to grips with the primary needs of life: food, clothing, house, and health. This is the part of life that causes most anxiety in people. Jesus teaches how to relate to material goods and to the riches of the world: do not accumulate goods (Mt 6: 19-21); do not look at the world with sad eyes (Mt 6: 22-23); do not serve God and money at the same time (Mt 6:24); do not worry about food and drink (Mt 6: 23-34).
- Mt 7: 1-29: The new relationship with people: a new life in community

Do not seek the straw in your brother's eye (Mt 7: 1-5); do not cast pearls before swine (Mt 7: 6); Do not be afraid of asking for things from God (Mt 7: 7-11); observe the golden rule (Mt 7: 12); seek the narrow and difficult path (Mt 7: 13-14); be wary of false prophets (Mt 7: 15-20); do not just talk but do (Mt 7: 21-23); the community built on these principles will stand in spite of raging storms (Mt 7: 24-27). The outcome of these words is a new awareness in the face of the scribes and doctors (Mt 7: 28-29).

Prayer in a Psalm: Psalm 40 (39)

Proclaiming the great justice of God I waited, I waited for Yahweh, then He stooped to me and heard my cry for help. He pulled me up from the seething chasm, from the mud of the mire. He set my feet on rock, and made my footsteps firm.

He put a fresh song in my mouth, praise of our God.

Many will be awestruck at the sight, and will put their trust in Yahweh.

How blessed are those who put their trust in Yahweh, who have not sided with rebels and those who have gone astray in falsehood. How much You have done, Yahweh, my God Your wonders, Your plans for us -- You have no equal. I will proclaim and speak of them; they are beyond number.

You wanted no sacrifice or cereal offering, but You gave me an open ear, You did not ask for burnt offering or sacrifice for sin; then I said, "Here I am, I am coming."

In the scroll of the book it is written of me, my delight is to do Your will; Your law, my God, is deep in my heart.

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

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

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

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

For troubles surround me, until they are beyond number; my sins have overtaken me; I cannot see my way.

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

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

Shame and dismay to all who seek to take my life. Back with them, let them be humiliated who delight in my misfortunes. Let them be aghast with shame, those who say to me, "Aha, aha!"

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

"Great is Yahweh" who love Your saving power. Poor and needy as I am, the Lord has me in mind.

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

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank for the word that has enabled us to understand better the will of the Father. May Your Spirit enlighten our actions and grant us the strength to practice what Your Word has revealed to us. May we, like Mary, Your mother, not only listen to

but also practice the Word. You who live and reign with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

Thursday, February 15, 2024

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,

You love us and You invite us to share in Your own life and joy, through a personal decision.

Help us to choose You and life and to remain ever loyal to this basic option by the power of Jesus Christ, Your Son, who was loyal to You and to us, now and forever.

Gospel Reading - Luke 9: 22-25

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

Reflection

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

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

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

men!" Satan is a Hebrew word which means accuser, the one who draws others far away from the path of God. Jesus does not allow Peter to get Him away from His mission.

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

Personal Questions

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

Concluding Prayer

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

Friday, February 16, 2024

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord of the Covenant,

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

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading – Matthew 9: 14-15

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

Reflection

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

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

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

Fasting and abstinence from meat are universal practices. The Muslims have fasting during Ramadan, during which they don't eat until the rising of the sun. For diverse reasons, people impose upon themselves some form of fasting. Fasting is an important means to control oneself and this exists in almost all religions. It is also appreciated by those who are health conscious.

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

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

Personal Questions

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

Concluding Prayer

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

Saturday, February 17, 2024

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord our God, merciful Father, when You call us to repentance, you want us to turn to people and to build up peace and justice among us all. According to Your promise, let us become, with Your strength, lights for those in darkness, water for those who thirst, re-builders of hope and happiness for all.

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

Gospel Reading – Luke. 5: 27-32

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

Reflection

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

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

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

Personal Questions

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

Concluding Prayer

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

Guard me, for I am faithful, save Your servant who relies on You. (Ps 86: 1-2)

Sunday, February 18, 2024

First 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 – Mark 1: 12-15

A Key to the Reading:

The text of this Sunday's liturgy presents us with the beginning of Jesus' public life: the forty days in the desert, the temptations of Satan, the arrest of John the Baptist, the beginning of the proclamation of the Good News of God and a brief summary of four points concerning the things that Jesus proclaimed to the people in His land. During the reading, let us pay attention to the following two points: What is Jesus proclaiming to the people and what is He asking of us?

A Division of the Text to Aid to the Reading:

- Mark 1: 12-13: The Good News is tried and put to the test in the desert.
- Mark 1: 14: Jesus begins the proclamation of the Good News of God.
- Mark 1: 15: A summary of the Good News of God.

The Text:

The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert, and He remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him. After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: "This is

the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."

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 the text did you like best and what made an impression on you? Why?
- Forty days in the desert and, after that, the temptations. What is the significance of this bit of information for the community at the time of Mark's writing? What is its significance for us today?
- It was the fact that John the Baptist was arrested that led Jesus to go back to Galilee and begin the proclamation of the Good News of God. What is the significance of this bit of information for the community at the time of Mark's writing? What is its significance for us today?
- The Good News that Jesus proclaimed has four points. What are they? What does each point signify?
- What is the message given by all these points for us today?

A Key to the Reading

for those who wish to go deeper into the theme.

The Context of the Text in Mark's Gospel:

- The Good News of God, prepared throughout history (Mk 1: 1-8), was solemnly proclaimed by the Father at the time of Jesus baptism (Mk 1: 9-11). Now, in our text, this proclamation is put to the test in the desert (Mk 1: 12-13) and the result of the long preparation becomes apparent. Jesus proclaims the Good News in public to the people (Mk 1: 14-15).
- In the 70s, when Mark is writing, as the Christians read this description of the beginning of the Good News, they also looked into the mirror of their own lives. The desert, temptations, prison, these were things with which they were familiar. Nevertheless, like Jesus, they tried to proclaim the Good News of God.

Comments:

- Mark 1: 12-13: The Good News is tried and tested in the desert.
After the baptism, the Spirit takes possession of Jesus and leads Him into the desert, where for forty days He prepares Himself for His mission (Mk 1: 12s). Mark says that Jesus remained in the desert for forty days and was tempted there by Satan. In Matthew 4: 1-11, the temptations are made explicit, the temptation of the bread, the temptation of prestige and the temptation of power. These were the three temptations experienced by the people in the desert after they went out of Egypt

(Dt 8: 3; 6: 13, 16). Temptation is whatever draws someone away from the way towards God. The letter to the Hebrews says, "Jesus was tempted in all things like us, except in sin" (Heb 4: 15). Taking His direction from the Word of God, Jesus faced the temptations (Mt 4: 4, 7, 10). Placed in the midst of the poor and united to the Father in prayer, Jesus remains faithful to both, resists and continues on the way of the Messiah-Servant, the way of service of God and of the people (Mt 20: 28).

- Mark 1: 14: Jesus begins to proclaim the Good News.

While Jesus was preparing Himself in the desert, John the Baptist was arrested by Herod. The text says, After John was arrested, Jesus went to Galilee, preaching the Gospel of God. John the Baptist's arrest did not surprise Jesus, rather the opposite. The experience of the baptism had opened His eyes. In John's arrest He saw a sign of the coming of the Kingdom. John the Baptist's arrest was connected with the politics of the country. Today, too, politics influences our proclamation of the Good News to the people. Mark says that Jesus proclaimed the Gospel of God. Jesus tells us that God is Good News for all human beings. Saint Augustine says, "You have made us for You, and our hearts will not rest until they rest in You." Jesus proclamation responds to the deepest searching of the human heart.

- Mark 1: 15: A summary of the Good News of God.

The proclamation of the Good News of God contains four points:

- i) The waiting is over.
- ii) The Kingdom of God has come.
- iii) A change of life.
- iv) Belief in the Good News.

- **The waiting is over!** For the other Jews, the time of waiting for the Kingdom was not yet over. For the Pharisees, for instance, the Kingdom would come only when the observance of the law was perfect. For the Essenes, when the country was purified. For the Herodians, when they would take over dominion over the world. Jesus' way of thinking is different. He reads events differently. He says that the time of waiting is over.
- **The Kingdom of God is at hand!** For the Pharisees and the Essenes, the coming of the Kingdom was dependent on their efforts. The Kingdom would come only when they had played their part, that is the observance of the whole of the Law, the purification of the whole country. Jesus says the opposite: "The Kingdom is at hand". The Kingdom was already there, among them, independently of any effort. When Jesus says, "The Kingdom is at hand", He is not saying that it is on the way at a particular moment, but that it is already there. What all were hoping for was already present in the midst of the people, and they did not know it, nor did they see it (cfr Lk 17: 21). Jesus saw it because He could see reality with different eyes. It is this hidden presence of the Kingdom in the midst of the people that Jesus reveals and proclaims to the poor of His land. It is this seed of the Kingdom that will receive the rain of His Word and the warmth of His love.
- **A change of life!** Some translate this as, "to do penance", others translate it as, "to convert" or "to repent". The exact meaning is to change the way of thinking and living. In order to be able to perceive this presence of the Kingdom, a person must begin to think, live and act differently. The person must change their way of life and find a new form of living. We must set aside the legalism taught by the Pharisees and allow the

new experience of God to invade our life and allow new sight to read and understand what goes on.

- **Belief in the Good News!** It was not easy to accept the message. It is not easy to begin to think in a completely different way from that learned since childhood. This is only possible by an act of faith. When someone comes with an unexpected piece of news which is difficult to accept, one accepts it only if the person who brings the news is worthy of trust. We would then also say to others, "You can believe this because I know the person and he/she does not deceive. This person can be believed because he/she speaks the truth." Jesus is worthy of our trust!

Further Information:

The beginning of Jesus preaching of the Good News of God in Galilee

The arrest of John made Jesus go back and begin His proclamation of the Good News. It was an explosive beginning! Jesus goes throughout Galilee, its villages, towns and cities (Mk 1: 39). He visits communities. He even changes His residence and goes to live in Capernaum (Mk 1: 21; 2: 1), a city at the crossroads, which made it easy for Him to spread the message. He almost never stays in the same place. He is always on the move. The disciples accompany Him everywhere, on the beach, on the road, on the mountain, in the desert, in the boat, in the synagogues, in the houses. They are full of enthusiasm.

Jesus helps people by serving them in several ways: He drives out evil spirits (Mk 1: 39), He heals the sick and afflicted (Mk 1: 34), purifies those marginalized on account of the laws concerning purity (Mk 1: 40-45), welcomes the marginalized and treats them with familiarity (Mk 2: 15). He proclaims, calls, convokes, attracts, consoles, helps. He reveals His passion, passion for the Father and for the poor and abandoned people of His land. Wherever there are people who will listen to Him, He speaks and conveys the Good News of God. Everywhere!

Jesus reveals everything that animates Him from within. Not only does He proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom, but He Himself is a figure and a living witness of the Kingdom. In Him we see what happens when someone allows God to rule and take possession of his/her life. By His life and manner of acting, Jesus reveals what God had in mind when He called the people at the time of Abraham and of Moses. Jesus put to rest a nostalgia and transformed it into hope. Suddenly it became clear for the people: "This is what God was asking for when He called us to be His people!". The people savored listening to Jesus.

Such was the beginning of the proclamation of the Good News of the Kingdom, which spread rapidly through the villages of Galilee. It started small like a seed but grew to become a large tree where people could find shelter (Mk 4: 31-32). Then the people themselves began to spread the news.

The people of Galilee were impressed by the way Jesus taught. "A new doctrine is taught with authority, not like that of the " (Mk 1: 22,27). Teaching was what Jesus did mostly (Mk 2: 13; 4: 1-2; 6: 34). It was His custom (Mk 10: 1). Over fifteen times, the Gospel of Mark says that Jesus taught. But Mark almost never says what He taught. Perhaps he was not interested in the content? It depends on what we mean by content. Teaching is not just a matter of passing on new truths to people. The content that Jesus preached manifests itself not only through His words, but also through His actions and in the manner of His relating to people. The content is never divorced from the person who communicates it. Good content without personal goodness is like spilled milk.

Mark defines the content of Jesus' teaching as "the Good News of God" (Mk 1: 14). The Good News that Jesus proclaimed comes from God and reveals something about God. All that Jesus says and does, manifests the traits of the face of God. They manifest the experience that Jesus has of God as Father. Revealing God as Father is the source, while the content is the object of the Good News of Jesus.

Psalm 25 (24)

The God of Jesus calls us to conversion
To thee, O Lord,
I lift up my soul.

O my God, in thee I trust, let me not be put to shame; let not my enemies exult over me.

Yea, let none that wait for thee be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous. Make me to know thy ways, O Lord; teach me thy paths.

Lead me in thy truth, and teach me, for thou art the God of my salvation; for thee I wait all the day long.

Be mindful of thy mercy, O Lord, and of thy steadfast love, for they have been from of old. Remember not the sins of my youth, or my transgressions; according to thy steadfast love remember me, for thy goodness' sake, O Lord!

Good and upright is the Lord; therefore He instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble His way.

All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep His covenant and His testimonies.

For thy name's sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great. Who is the man that fears the Lord?

Him will He instruct in the way that He should choose. He himself shall abide in prosperity, and His children shall possess the land.

The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear Him, and He makes known to them His covenant.

My eyes are ever toward the Lord, for He will pluck my feet out of the net. Turn thou to me, and be gracious to me; for I am lonely and afflicted.

Relieve the troubles of my heart, and bring me out of my distresses.

Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins.

Consider how many are my foes, and with what violent hatred they hate me. Oh guard my life, and deliver me; let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in thee.

May integrity and uprightness preserve me, for I wait for thee.

Redeem Israel, O God, out of all his troubles.

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, February 19, 2024

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord, holy God, loving Father,

you give us the task to love one another because You are holy and You have loved us before we could love You.

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

Make us witnesses that love exists and is alive and that You, the God of love, exist and are alive now forever.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 25: 31-46

Jesus said to his disciples: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?'

And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.' Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the Devil and his angels. For I was hungry, and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me.'

Then they will answer and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?' He will answer them, 'Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.' And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

Reflection

The Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus as the New Messiah. Like Moses, Jesus also promulgates the Law of God. As with the ancient law, the new one, given by Jesus, also contains five books or discourses. The Sermon on the Mountain (Mt 5: 1 to 7: 27), the

first discourse, opens with eight Beatitudes. The discourse on vigilance (Mt 2: 4, 1 to 25, 46), the fifth discourse, contains the description of the Last Judgment. The Beatitudes describe the door of entrance into the Kingdom, enumerating eight categories of people: the poor in spirit, the meek, the afflicted, those who hunger and thirst for justice, the merciful, the pure of heart, the peacemakers and the persecuted because of justice (Mt 5: 3-10). The parable of the Last Judgment tells us what we should do in order to possess the Kingdom: accept the hungry, the thirsty, the foreigners, the naked, the sick and the prisoners (Mt 25: 35-36): At the beginning, as well as at the end of the New Law, there are the excluded and the marginalized.

- Matthew 25: 31-33: Opening of the Last Judgment. The Son of Man gathers together around Him the nations of the world. He separates people as the shepherd does with the sheep and the goats. The shepherd knows how to discern. He does not make a mistake; sheep on the right, goats on the left. Jesus does not make a mistake. Jesus does not judge nor condemn. (cfr. Jn 3: 17; 12: 47). He does not separate alone. It is the person himself/herself who judges and condemns because of the way in which he/she behaves toward the little ones and the excluded.
- Matthew 25: 34-36: The sentence for those who are at the right hand of the Judge. Those who are at the right hand of the judge are called Blessed of my Father! That is, they receive the blessing which God promised to Abraham and to his descendants (Gen 12: 3). They are invited to take possession of the Kingdom, prepared for them from the foundation of the world. The reason for the sentence is the following: I was hungry, a foreigner, naked, sick and prisoner, and you accepted me and helped me! This sentence makes us understand who are the sheep. They are the persons who accepted the Judge when he was hungry, thirsty, a foreigner, naked, sick and prisoner. Because of the way of speaking about my Father and the Son of Man, we can know that the Judge is precisely Jesus Himself. He identifies Himself with the little ones!
- Matthew 25: 37-40: A request for clarification and the response of the Judge: Those who accept the excluded are called just. That means that the justice of the Kingdom is not attained by observing norms and prescriptions, but rather by accepting those in need. But it is strange that the just do not even know themselves when they accepted Jesus in need. Jesus responds: Every time that you have done this to one of my brothers, you have done it to me. Who are these little brothers of mine? In other passages of the Gospel of Matthew, the expression "my brothers" indicates the disciples (Mt 12: 48-50; 28: 10). This also indicates the members of the community who are more abandoned and neglected who have no place and are not well received (Mt 10: 40). Jesus identifies Himself with them. In the broader context of the last parable, the expression "my smallest brothers" is extended and includes all those who have no place in society. It indicates all the poor. The just and the blessed by my Father are all the persons from all nations who accept and welcome others with total gratuity, independently of the fact that they are Christians or not.
- Matthew 25: 41-43: The sentence for those who were at the left-hand side. Those who were on the other side of the Judge are called cursed and they are destined to go to the eternal fire, prepared by the devil and his friends. Jesus uses a symbolic language common at that time to say that these persons will not enter into the Kingdom. And here, also, there is only one reason: they did not accept or welcome Jesus as one who is hungry, thirsty, a foreigner, naked, sick and/or a prisoner. It is not that Jesus

prevents them from entering into the Kingdom, rather it is our way of acting that is our blindness which prevents us from seeing Jesus in the little ones.

- Matthew 25: 44-46: A request for clarification and the response of the Judge. The request for clarification indicates that it is a question of people who have behaved well, people who have their conscience in peace. They are certain to have always practiced what God asked from them. For this reason, they were surprised when the Judge says that they did not accept Him, did not welcome Him. The Judge responds: Every time that you have not done these things to one of my brothers, the little ones, you did not do it to me. It is the omission! They did not do anything extra. They only missed practicing good towards the little ones and the excluded. This is the way the fifth Book of the New Law ends!

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

Personal Questions

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

Concluding Prayer

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

Tuesday, February 20, 2024

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord God,
you speak Your mighty word to us, but we cannot hear it
unless it stirs our lives
and is spoken in human terms.
Keep speaking Your word to us, Lord, and open our hearts to it,
that it may bear fruit in us when we do Your will
and carry out what we are sent to do.
We ask You this through Your living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 6: 7-15

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

Reflection

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

- Matthew 6: 7-8: The faults to be corrected. Jesus criticizes the people for whom prayer was a repetition of a magic formula, strong words addressed to God to oblige Him to respond to our needs. The acceptance of our prayer by God does not depend on the repetition of words, but on God's goodness, on God who is love and mercy. He wants our good and knows our needs even before we pray to Him.
- Matthew 6: 9a: The first words: Our Father, Abba Father, is the name which Jesus uses to address Himself to God. It reveals the new relationship with God that should characterize the life of the communities (Ga 4: 6; Rm 8: 15). We say Our Father and not My Father. The adjective places the accent on the awareness or knowledge that we all belong to the great human family of all races and creeds. To pray to the Father is to enter in intimacy with Him. It also means to be sensitive to the cry of all the brothers and sisters who cry for their daily bread. It means to seek in the first place the Kingdom of God. The experience of God as our Father is the foundation of universal fraternity. Matthew 6: 9b-10: Three requests for the cause of God: The Name, the Kingdom, the Will. In the first part we ask that our relationship with God may be re-established again. To sanctify His name: The name JAHVE means I am with you! God knows. In this name He makes Himself known (Ex 3: 11-15). The name of God is sanctified when it is used with faith and not with magic; when it is used according to its true objective, not for oppression but for the liberty or freedom of the people and for the construction of the Kingdom. The coming of the Kingdom: The only Lord and King of life is God (Is 45: 21; 46: 9). The coming of the Kingdom is the fulfillment of all the hopes and promises. It is life in plenitude, the overcoming of frustration suffered with human kings and governments. This Kingdom will come when the Will of God will be fully accomplished. To do His will: The will of God is expressed in His Law. His will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. In Heaven the sun and the stars obey the laws of their orbit and create the order of the universe (Is 48: 12-13). The observance of the law of God will be a source of order and well-being for human life.
- Matthew 6: 11-13: Four petitions for the cause of the brothers: Bread, Pardon, Victory, Liberty. In the second part of the Our Father we ask that the relationship among persons may be restored. The four requests show how necessary it is to transform or change the structures of the community and society in order that all the sons and daughters of God may have the same dignity. The daily bread. In Exodus the people received the manna in the desert every day (Ex 16: 35). Divine Providence passed

through the fraternal organization, the sharing. Jesus invites us to live a new Exodus, a new fraternal way of living together which will guarantee the daily bread for all (Mt 6: 34-44; Jo 6: 48-51). Forgive us our debts: Every 50 years, the Jubilee Year obliged people to forgive their debts. It was a new beginning (Lv 25: 8-55). Jesus announces a new Jubilee Year, a year of grace from the Lord (Lk 4: 19). The Gospel wants to begin everything anew! Do not lead us into temptation, do not put us to the test: In Exodus, people were tempted and fell (Dt 9: 6-12). The people complained and wanted to go back (Ex 16: 3; 17: 3). In the new Exodus, the temptation will be overcome by the strength which people receive from God (I Co 10: 12-13). Deliver us from evil: The Evil One is Satan, who draws away from God and is a cause of scandal. He succeeds in entering in Peter (Mt 16: 23) and to tempt Jesus in the desert. Jesus overcomes him (Mt 4: 1-11). He tells us: Courage, I have conquered the world! (Jn 16: 33).

- Matthew 6: 14-15: Anyone who does not forgive will not be forgiven. In praying the Our Father, we pronounce the phrase which condemns us or absolves us. We say: Forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass us (Mt 6: 12). We offer God the measure of pardon that we want. If we forgive very much, He will forgive us very much. If we forgive little, He will forgive little. If we do not forgive, He will not forgive us.

Personal Questions

Jesus prayer says “forgive our debts.” In some countries it is translated as “forgive our offenses.” What is easier to forgive, the offenses or to forgive the debts?

Christian nations of the Northern Hemisphere (Europe and USA) pray everyday: Forgive our debts as we forgive those who are in debt to us! But they do not forgive the external debt of poor countries of the Third World. How can we explain this terrible contradiction, source of impoverishment of millions of people?

Debt, in the context of society, is not only money. In fact, in referring to people who have served time in jail we say “they have paid their debt to society”. Do we accept these people back into society? Not only have they paid their “debt”, they are often treated as having not been forgiven.

How do we forgive others in terms of immigration, documented or not, and accept them into our communities?

Concluding Prayer

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

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

Wednesday, February 21, 2024

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Forgiving, merciful God,

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

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

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Luke 11: 29-32

While still more people gathered in the crowd, Jesus said to them, "This generation is an evil generation; it seeks a sign, but no sign will be given it, except the sign of Jonah. Just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. At the judgment the queen of the south will rise with the men of this generation, and she will condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and there is something greater than Solomon here. At the judgment the men of Nineveh will arise with this generation and condemn it, because at the preaching of Jonah they repented, and there is something greater than Jonah here."

Reflection

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

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

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

Personal Questions

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

Concluding Prayer

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

Thursday, February 22, 2024

The Chair of St. Peter the Apostle

Opening Prayer

Almighty God,

you have given us the witnessing of the apostles as the firm rock on which we can rely.

Where Peter is, there is the Church.

But we see today that the bark of Peter is rocked; we are often like capricious children unused to our newfound freedom.

Make us use this freedom responsibly and do not allow us to lose our composure.

Reassure us that You are always with us and keep us optimistic about the future, for it is Your future and You are our rock forever.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 16: 13-19

When Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter said in reply, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Jesus said to him in reply, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the Kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

Reflection

Today's Gospel presents us three points: the opinion of the people concerning Jesus (Mt 16: 13-14), the opinion of Peter regarding Jesus (Mt 16: 15-16) and the response of Jesus to Peter (Mt 16: 17-19).

- Matthew 16: 13-14: **The opinion of the people regarding Jesus.** Jesus asks for the opinion of the people regarding who He is. The responses are diverse: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. Not one of them gives the right answer. Today, the opinion of the people regarding Jesus is also very varied.
- Matthew 16: 15-16: **The opinion of Peter regarding Jesus.** Immediately, He asks the opinion of the disciples. Peter becomes the spokesperson and says: You are the Christ, the Son of the living God! The response is not new. The disciples had already said the same thing (Mt 14: 33). In the Gospel of John, the same profession of faith is made by Martha (Jn 11: 27). It means that through Jesus the prophecies of the Old Testament are fulfilled.
- Matthew 16: 17-19: **The response of Jesus to Peter.** The responses come from several places: **Blessed are you, Simon.** Jesus proclaims Peter blessed because he had received the revelation from the Father. The response of Jesus is not new. Previously, He had praised the Father for having revealed the Son to little ones and not to the wise (Mt 11: 25-27) and had made the same proclamation of blessed to the disciples because they were seeing and hearing things that before nobody knew (Mt 13:16).
- **Peter is Rock (Pietra).** Peter has to be **Rock**, the stable foundation for the Church in such a way that it can resist against the gates of Hell. With these words from Jesus, Matthew encourages the communities which were persecuted by Syria and Palestine. Even if weak and persecuted, the communities have a stable foundation, guaranteed by the words of Jesus. The rock as the basis of faith reminds the people the words of God to the People in exile: Listen to me, you who pursue saving justice, you who seek Yahweh. Consider the rock from which you were hewn, the quarry from which you were dug. Consider Abraham your father and Sarah who gave you birth. When I called him he was the only one but I blessed him and made him numerous. (Is 51: 1-2). It indicates a new beginning.
- **Peter, Rock.** Jesus gives a name to Simon and calls him Rock (Peter). In two ways, he is **rock-foundation**, (Mt 16: 18) and is **rock (pietra) a stumbling obstacle**, (Mt 16: 23). In our Catholic Church we insist very much on Peter rock-foundation and we forget Peter-stumbling rock or obstacle. On the one hand Peter was weak in his faith, doubtful, and tries to deviate or withdraw from Jesus. He was afraid in the garden, he fell asleep and fled, he did not understand what Jesus was saying. On the other hand, he was like the little ones whom Jesus called blessed. Being one of the twelve, he became their spokesman. Later, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, his image grew and he became a symbol of the community. Peter is firm in faith not because of his own merits, but because Jesus prays for him, in order that his faith would not fail (Lk 22: 31-34).

- **Church, Assembly.** The word **church**, in Greek, *eklesia*, appears 105 times in the New Testament, almost exclusively in the Acts of the Apostles and in the Epistles. In the Gospels it appears three times, only in Matthew. The word literally means convoked or chosen . It indicates the people who gather together, convoked by the Word of God and who try to live the message of the Kingdom which Jesus brings. The Church or the community is not the Kingdom, but it is an instrument and a sign or indication of the Kingdom. The Kingdom is greater. In the Church, in the community, it should appear in the eyes of all what happens when a human group allows God to reign and allows Him to take possession of our life.
- **The keys of the Kingdom.** Peter receives the keys of the Kingdom. This same power of uniting or binding and of separating or loosening is also given to the communities (Mt 18: 18) and to the other disciples (Jn 20: 23). One of the points which the Gospel of Matthew insists the most is reconciliation and pardon or forgiveness. It is one of the more important tasks of the coordinators of the communities. Imitating Peter, they should bind and loose, that is, do in such a way that there be reconciliation, reciprocal acceptance, and construction of the fraternal spirit.

Personal Questions

- What are the opinions in our community regarding Jesus? Do they enrich the community, or do they make the journey and communion more difficult?
- Who is Jesus for me? Who am I for Jesus?

Concluding Prayer

Turn your ear to me, make haste. Be for me a rock-fastness, a fortified citadel to save me. You are my rock, my rampart; true to your name, lead me and guide me! (Ps 31: 2-3)

Friday, February 23, 2024

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 forever.

Gospel Reading – Matthew 5: 20-26

Jesus said to his disciples: "I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the Kingdom of heaven. "You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment. But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment, and whoever says to his brother, *raqa*, will be answerable to the Sanhedrin, and whoever

says, 'You fool,' will be liable to fiery Gehenna. Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Settle with your opponent quickly while on the way to court. Otherwise, your opponent will hand you over to the judge, and the judge will hand you over to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Amen, I say to you, you will not be released until you have paid the last penny."

Reflection

- The text of today's Gospel forms part of a broader or more extensive whole: Mt 5: 20 up to Mt 5: 48. In these passages Matthew tells us how Jesus interprets and explains the Law of God. Five times He repeats the phrase: You have heard how it was said to our ancestors, in truth I tell you! (Mt 5: 21, 27, 33, 38, 43). Before, He had said: Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; no, I have come not to abolish, but to complete them (Mt 5: 17). The attitude of Jesus before the Law is, at the same time, one of breaking and of continuity. He breaks away from the erroneous interpretations but maintains firm the objective which the Law should attain: the practice of a greater justice, which is Love.
- Matthew 5: 20: An uprightness which surpasses that of the Pharisees. This first verse presents the general key of everything which follows in Matthew 5: 20-48. The word Justice never appears in the Gospel of Mark, and it appears seven times in that of Matthew (Mt 3: 15; 5: 6,10, 20; 6: 1, 33; 21: 32). This has something to do with the situation of the communities for which Mark wrote. The religious ideal of the Jews of the time was to be just before God. The Pharisees taught: people attain justice before God when they succeed to observe all the norms of the law in all its details! This teaching generated a legalistic oppression and caused great anguish in the people because it was very difficult to be able to observe all the norms (cfr. Rm 7: 21-24). This is why Matthew takes the words of Jesus on justice to show that it has to surpass the justice of the Pharisees (Mt. 5: 20). According to Jesus, justice does not come from what I do for God in observing the law, but rather from what God does for me, accepting me as His son or as His daughter. The new ideal which Jesus proposes is the following: therefore, be perfect as is your Heavenly Father! (Mt 5: 48). That means: you will be just before God when you try to accept and forgive people as God accepts and pardons me, in spite of my defects and sins.

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

- Matthew 5: 21-22: The law says: You shall not kill! (Ex 20:13). In order to observe fully this commandment, it is not sufficient to avoid murdering. It is necessary to uproot from within everything which, in one way or another, can lead to murder, for example, anger, hatred, the desire to revenge, insult, and exploitation, etc.
- Matthew 5: 23-24. The perfect worship which God wants. In order to be accepted by God and to remain united to Him, it is necessary to reconcile oneself with brother and sister. Before the destruction of the Temple, in the year 70, when the Christian Jews participated in the pilgrimages in Jerusalem to present their offerings at the altar and to pay their promises, they always remembered this phrase of Jesus. In the year 80, at the time when Matthew wrote, the Temple and the Altar no longer

existed. They had been destroyed by the Romans. The community and the communitarian celebration became the Temple and the Altar of God.

- Matthew 5: 25-26: To reconcile oneself. One of the points on which the Gospel of Matthew exists the most is reconciliation. That indicates that in the communities of that time, there were many tensions among the radical groups with diverse tendencies and sometimes even opposing ones. Nobody wanted to cede to the other. There was no dialogue. Matthew enlightens this situation with the words of Jesus on reconciliation which demands acceptance and understanding. The only sin that God does not forgive is our lack of pardon toward others (Mt 6: 14). That is why one should try to reconcile yourself before it is too late!

Personal Questions

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

Concluding Prayer

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

Saturday, February 24, 2024

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

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

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

Gospel Reading – Matthew 5: 43-48

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

Reflection

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

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

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

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

Personal Questions

- Am I capable to love my enemies?

- Contemplate Jesus, in silence, who at the hour of His death, loved the enemy who killed Him.

Concluding Prayer

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

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

Sunday, February 25, 2024

Second 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 - Mark 9: 2-10

A Key to the Reading:

On this second Sunday of Lent, the Church meditates on the Transfiguration of Jesus in the presence of the three disciples who joined Him on the mountain. The Transfiguration takes place after the first announcement of the death of Jesus (Lk 9: 21-22). This announcement had confused the disciples and especially Peter. When we take a close look at the small details, we see that the text describes the transfiguration in a way that makes us aware of how this unusual experience of Jesus was able to help the disciples overcome the crisis in which they found themselves. As we read, let us try to pay attention to the following: "How did the transfiguration take place and what was the reaction of the disciples towards this experience?"

A Division of the Text to Help our Reading:

- Mark 9: 2-4: The Transfiguration of Jesus in the presence of his disciples
- Mark 9: 5-6: Peter's reaction to the transfiguration
- Mark 9: 7-8: The voice from heaven that explains the meaning of the Transfiguration
- Mark 9: 9-10: Keeping secret what they had seen

Text:

Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them. Then Elijah appeared to them along with Moses, and they were conversing with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus in reply, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here! Let us make three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He hardly knew what to say, they were so terrified. Then a cloud came, casting a shadow over them; from the cloud came a voice, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone but Jesus alone with them. As they were coming down from the mountain, he charged them not to relate what they had seen to anyone, except when the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what rising from the dead meant.

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.

- Which part of the text did you like most or touched you most? Why?
- How does the transfiguration take place and what is the reaction of the disciples to this experience?
- Why does the text present Jesus with brilliant clothes while He is speaking with Moses and Elijah? Who are Moses and Elijah for Jesus? Who are they for the disciples?
- What is the message of the voice from heaven for Jesus? And what is the message for the disciples?
- How can we **transfigure**, today, our personal and family life and the life of the community in our area?

To Go Deeper into the Theme

The Context Then and Now

The foretelling of the passion sank the disciples into a deep crisis. They lived among the poor, but in their minds they were confused, lost as they were in the propaganda of the government and of the official religion of their time (Mk 8: 15). The official religion taught that the Messiah would be glorious and victorious! That is why Peter reacts strongly against the cross (Mk 8: 32). Someone condemned to die on the cross could not be the Messiah, rather, according to the Law of God, he had to be considered cursed by God (Dt 21: 22-23). In these circumstances, the experience of the Transfiguration of Jesus was able to help the disciples overcome the trauma of the Cross. In fact, at the Transfiguration, Jesus appears in glory and speaks with Moses and Elijah of His passion and death (Lk 9: 31). The journey towards glory, then, is through the cross.

In the 70's, when Mark is writing his Gospel, the Cross was a great obstacle for the Jews to accept Jesus as the Messiah. How could it be that one crucified, one who died as one marginalized, was the great Messiah expected for centuries by the people? The cross was an obstacle to believing in Jesus. "The cross is a scandal," they said (1Cor 1: 23). The

community did not know how to respond to the critical questions put to them by the Jews. One of the great efforts of the early Christians was that of assisting people to see that the cross was neither scandal nor madness, but rather the expression of the power and wisdom of God (1Cor 1: 22-31). Mark's Gospel contributes to that effort. He uses texts from the Old Testament to describe the scene of the Transfiguration. He shed light on the events of the life of Jesus and shows that Jesus fulfills the prophecies and that the Cross is the way that leads to Glory. It was not just the cross of Jesus that was a problem! In the 70's, the cross of persecution was part of every-day life for Christians. In fact, just a little time before, Nero had launched his persecution, and many died. Today, many people suffer because they are Christians and because they live the Gospel. How do we approach the cross? What does it mean? With these questions in mind, we meditate and comment on the text of the transfiguration.

A Commentary on the Text:

- Mark 9: 2-4 - Jesus looks different.

Jesus goes up a high mountain. Luke adds that He goes there to pray (Lk 9: 28). There, on the summit of the mountain, Jesus appears in glory in the presence of Peter, James and John. Together with Him appear Moses and Elijah. The high mountain recalls Mount Sinai, where in times past, God had made known His will to the people by presenting the law to Moses. The white clothes of Jesus recall Moses shrouded in light as he speaks to God on the mountain and receives the law from God (cf. Ex 34: 29-35). Elijah and Moses, the two great authorities of the Old Testament, speak with Jesus. Moses represents the Law and Elijah the prophets. Luke says that they talked about the death of Jesus in Jerusalem (Lk 9: 31). Thus, it was clear that the Old Testament, both the Law and the Prophets, taught that the way to glory is through the cross (Cf Is 53). Mark 9: 5-6: Peter likes what is happening but does not understand.

Peter likes what is going on and wants this pleasing moment on the Mountain to last. He suggests building three tents. Mark says that Peter was afraid and did not know what he was saying, and Luke adds that the disciples were sleepy (Lk 9: 32). For them, as it is for us, it is difficult to understand the Cross!

The description of the transfiguration begins with an affirmation. Six days later. What six days are these? Some scholars explain this phrase thus: Peter wants to build three tents, because it was the sixth day of the feast of tents. This was a very popular feast of six days that celebrated the gift of the Law of God and the forty years spent in the desert. To recall these forty years, the people had to spend six days in temporary tents. That is why it was called the Feast of the Tents. If they could not celebrate the whole six days, they had to celebrate at least the sixth day. The affirmation "six days later" would then be an allusion to the feast of the tents. That is why Peter recalls the duty of building tents. And spontaneously, he offers to build the tents. Thus Jesus, Moses and Elijah would have been able to go on talking.

- Mark 9: 7 - The voice from heaven shed light on the events.

As soon as Jesus is shrouded in glory, a voice from heaven says: "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to Him!" The expression "Beloved Son" recalls the figure of the Servant Messiah, proclaimed by the prophet Isaiah (cf. Is 42: 1). The expression "Listen to Him" recalls the prophecy that promised the coming of the new Moses (cf. Dt 18: 15). In Jesus, the prophecies of the Old Testament are being fulfilled. The disciples could not doubt this. The Christians of the 70's could not doubt this. Jesus is truly the glorious Messiah, but the way to glory is through the cross, the second proclamation made in the prophecy of the servant (Is 53: 3-9). The glory of the Transfiguration is

proof of this. Moses and Elijah confirm this. The Father is the guarantor of this. Jesus accepts this.

- Mark 9: 8 - Only Jesus and no one else!

Mark says that after the vision, the disciples see only Jesus and no one else. The emphasis on the affirmation that they see only Jesus suggests that from now on Jesus is the only revelation of God for us! For us Christians, Jesus, and only Jesus, is the key to understanding the complete meaning of the Old Testament.

- Mark 9: 9-10 - Knowing how to keep silent.

Jesus asks His disciples not to say anything to anyone until He has risen from the dead, but the disciples do not understand Him. Indeed, anyone who does not link suffering to the resurrection, does not understand the meaning of the Cross. Jesus is stronger than death.

- Mark 9: 11-13 - The return of the prophet Elijah.

The prophet Malachi had proclaimed that Elijah was to return to prepare the way of the Messiah (Ml 3: 23-24). This same proclamation is also found in the book of Ecclesiastes (Ec 48: 10). How could Jesus be the Messiah if Elijah had not returned yet? That is why the disciples asked: Why do they say that Elijah must come first? (9: 11). Jesus' reply is clear: I tell you that Elijah has come and they have treated him as they pleased, just as the scriptures say about him (9: 13). Jesus was referring to John the Baptist who was murdered by Herod (Mt 17: 13).

Further Information:

- The Transfiguration: the change that takes place in the practice of Jesus

In the middle of conflicts with the Pharisees and Herodians (Mk 8: 11-21), Jesus leaves Galilee and goes to the region of Caesarea Philippi (Mk 8: 27), where He begins to prepare His disciples. On the way, He puts a question to them: "Who do people say I am?" (Mk 8: 27) After listening to their reply that they considered Him the Messiah, Jesus begins to speak of His passion and death (Mk 8: 31). Peter reacts: "Heaven preserve You, Lord!" (Mt 16: 22). Jesus replies: "Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle in my path, because you are thinking not as God thinks but as human beings do!" (Mk 8: 33) This was a moment of crisis for the disciples, who still held on to the thought of a glorious Messiah (Mk 8: 32-33; 9: 32), not understanding Jesus' reply and trying to divert it in another direction. It was close to the Feast of the Tents, (cf Lk 9: 33), when the popular messianic expectation was much stronger than usual. Jesus goes up the mountain to pray (Lk 9: 28). He overcomes temptation by prayer. The revelation of the Kingdom was different from that which the people imagined. The victory of the servant would take place through the death sentence (Is 50: 4-9; 53: 1-12). The cross appears on the horizon, not just as a possibility, but as a certainty. From this moment on a change takes place in Jesus practice. Here are some important signs of this change: Few miracles. At first there are many miracles. Now, beginning with Mk 8: 27; Mt 16: 13 and Lk 9: 18, miracles are almost an exception in Jesus activities.

- Proclaiming the Passion. Earlier there was talk of the passion as a remote possibility (Mk 3: 6). Now there is constant talk of it (Mk 8: 31; 9: 9, 31; 10: 33, 38).
- Taking up the Cross. Earlier, Jesus proclaimed the imminent coming of the Kingdom. Now He insists on watchfulness, the demands on those who follow Him, and the

necessity to take up one's cross (Mt 16: 24-26; 19: 27-30; 24: 42-51; 25: 1-13; Mk 8: 34; 10: 28-31; Lk 9: 23-26, 57-62; 12: 8-9, 35-48; 14: 25-33; 17: 33; 18: 28-30).

- He teaches the disciples. Earlier He taught the people. Now He is more concerned with the formation of His disciples. He asks them to choose again (Jn 6: 67) and begins to prepare them for the future mission. He goes out of the city so as to stay with them and busy Himself with their formation (Mk 8: 27; 9: 28, 30-35; 10: 10, 23.28-32; 11: 11).
- Different parables. Earlier, the parables revealed the mystery of the Kingdom present in the activities of Jesus. Now the parables tend towards the future judgment, at the end of time: the murderous vine growers (Mt 21: 33-46); the merciless servant (Mt 18: 23-35), the workers of the eleventh hour (Mt 20: 1-16), the two sons (Mt 21: 28-32), the wedding banquet (Mt 22: 1-14), the ten talents (Mt 25: 14-30).

Jesus accepts the will of the Father that is revealed in the new situation and decides to go to Jerusalem (Lk 9: 51). He takes this decision with such determination as to frighten His disciples, who cannot understand what is going on (Mk 10: 32; Lk 18: 31-34). In the society of that time, the proclamation of the Kingdom as Jesus proclaimed it could not be tolerated. So, either He had to change or He had to die! Jesus did not change His proclamation. He continued to be faithful to the Father and to the poor. That is why He was sentenced to death!

- The transfiguration and the return of the prophet Elijah
In Mark's Gospel, the scene of the transfiguration is linked to the question of the return of the prophet Elijah (Mk 9: 9-13). In those days, people expected the return of the prophet Elijah and were not aware that Elijah had already returned in the person of John the Baptist (Mk 9: 13). The same thing happens today. Many people live in expectation of the return of Jesus and even write on the walls of cities: **Jesus will return!** They are not aware that Jesus is already present in our lives. Every now and then, like an unexpected flash of lightning, this presence of Jesus breaks out and shines, transforming our lives. A question that each one of us should ask is: Has my faith in Jesus offered me a moment of transfiguration and intense joy? How have such moments of joy given me strength in moments of difficulties?

The Prayer of a Psalm: Psalm 27 (26)

The Lord is my light

Yahweh is my light and my salvation, whom should I fear? Yahweh is the fortress of my life, whom should I dread?

When the wicked advance against me to eat me up, they, my opponents, my enemies, are the ones who stumble and fall.

Though an army pitch camp against me, my heart will not fear, though war break out against me, my trust will never be shaken.

One thing I ask of Yahweh, one thing I seek: to dwell in Yahweh's house all the days of my life, to enjoy the sweetness of Yahweh, to seek out His temple.

For He hides me away under His roof on the day of evil, He folds me in the recesses of His tent, sets me high on a rock.

Now my head is held high above the enemies who surround me; in His tent I will offer sacrifices of acclaim. I will sing, I will make music for Yahweh.

Yahweh, hear my voice as I cry, pity me, answer me! Of You my heart has said, 'Seek His face!' Your face, Yahweh, I seek; do not turn away from me.

Do not thrust aside Your servant in anger, without You I am helpless. Never leave me, never forsake me, God, my Saviour.

Though my father and mother forsake me, Yahweh will gather me up.

Yahweh, teach me Your way, lead me on the path of integrity because of my enemies; do not abandon me to the will of my foes— false witnesses have risen against me, and are breathing out violence.

This I believe: I shall see the goodness of Yahweh, in the land of the living. Put your hope in Yahweh, be strong, Let your heart be bold, put your hope in Yahweh.

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, February 26, 2024

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Just and holy God, our loving Father,

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

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

Forgive us, for we count on You.

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

Gospel Reading - Luke 6: 36-38

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

Reflection

These three brief verses of today's Gospel (Lk 6: 36-38) are the final part of a brief discourse of Jesus (Lk 6: 20-38). In the first part of His discourse, He addresses Himself to the disciples (Lk 6: 20) and to the rich (Lk 6: 24) proclaiming four beatitudes for the

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

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

Personal Questions

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

Concluding Prayer

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

Tuesday, February 27, 2024

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord God,

you want us to live our faith not so much as a set of rules and practices but as a relationship from person to person with You and with people.

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

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

Reflection

- Today's Gospel 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 attacks on 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, as 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 behavior of some doctors of the Law. In meditating on this incoherence, it is helpful to think about ourselves and not about the Pharisees and the scribes of that time already past. 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 into 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 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 behavior 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?

Concluding Prayer

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

Wednesday, February 28, 2024

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,

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

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

We ask You this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 20: 17-28

As Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, He took the Twelve disciples aside by themselves, and said to them on the way, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and scourged and crucified and He will be raised on the third day." Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee approached Jesus with her sons and did him homage, wishing to ask him for something. He said to her, "What do you wish?" She answered him, "Command that these two sons of mine sit, one at your right and the other at your left, in your kingdom." Jesus said in reply, "You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the chalice that I am going to drink?" They said to him, "We can." He replied, "My chalice you will indeed drink, but to sit at my right and at my left, this is not mine to give but is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father." When the ten heard this, they became indignant at the two brothers. But Jesus summoned them and said, "You know that the rulers of the

Gentiles lord it over them, and the great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many."

Reflection

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

- Matthew 20: 17-19: The third announcement of the Passion. Going toward Jerusalem, Jesus walks in front of them. He knows that He is going to be killed. The Prophet Isaiah had already announced it (Is 50: 4-6; 53: 1-10). His death is not the fruit of a plan established in advance, but the consequence of the commitment taken concerning the mission received from the Father, to be at the side of the excluded of His time. This is why Jesus speaks to the disciples about the tortures and death that He will have to face in Jerusalem. The disciple should follow the Master, even if He has to suffer like 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 ideology of that time had profoundly penetrated the mentality of the disciples. In spite of the fact of having lived with Jesus several years, they had not renewed their way of seeing things. They looked at Jesus as always, with the same look. They wanted a reward for following Jesus. The same tensions existed in the communities of the time of Matthew and they still exist today in our own communities.
- Matthew 20: 22-23: Jesus' answer. Jesus reacts firmly: You do not know what you are asking for! And He asks if they are capable of drinking the chalice that he, Jesus, will drink and if they are ready to receive the baptism which He will receive. It is the chalice of suffering, the baptism of blood! Jesus wants to know if they, instead of the places of honor, accept to give their life up to death. Both answer: We can! It seems to be a response not given from within, because a few days later, they abandoned Jesus and left Him alone at the hour of suffering (Mk 14: 50). They do not have a great critical knowledge; they do not perceive their personal reality. In what concerns the first place, the place of honor, in the Kingdom at the side of Jesus, the one who grants this is the Father. What he, Jesus, has to offer, is the chalice and the baptism, suffering and the cross.
- Matthew 20: 24-27: It should not be like that among you: Jesus speaks once again, on the exercise of power (cfr. Mk 9: 33-35). At that time those who held power did not give an account to people. They acted as they wished (cfr. Mk 6: 27-28). The Roman Empire controlled the world and maintained it with the force of the arms. Through tributes, taxes, it succeeded in concentrating the riches of the people in the hands of a few in Rome. Society was characterized by the repressive and abusive exercise of power. Jesus had an altogether different proposal. He said: It should not be like

that among you; the one who wants to become great among you should become a servant, and the one who wants to be the first one among you will become your slave! He teaches against privileges and rivalry. He wants to change the system and insists on that service as the remedy against personal ambition.

- Matthew 20: 28: The summary of the life of Jesus. Jesus defines His mission and His life: I have not come to be served but to serve! He has come to give His own life for the salvation of many. He is the Messiah Servant, announced by the Prophet Isaiah (cfr. Is 42: 1-9; 49: 1-6; 50: 4-9); 52: 13-53: 12). He learned from His Mother who said: Behold, the handmaid of the Lord! (Lk 1: 38). A totally new proposal for the society of that time.

Personal Questions

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

Concluding Prayer

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

Thursday, February 29, 2024

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord our God, many of us never had it so good, and so we have become smug and self-satisfied, happy in our own little world. God, may our ears remain open to Your word and our hearts to You and to our brothers and sisters. Do not allow us to forget You, or to place our trust in ourselves. Make us restless for You through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Luke 16:19-31

Jesus said to the Pharisees: "There was a rich man who dressed in purple garments and fine linen and dined sumptuously each day. And lying at his door was a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who would gladly have eaten his fill of the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. Dogs even used to come and lick his sores. When the poor man died, he was carried away by angels to the bosom of Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried, and from the netherworld, where he was in torment, he raised his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he cried out, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am suffering torment in these flames.' Abraham replied, 'My child, remember that you received what was good during your lifetime while Lazarus likewise received what was bad; but now he is comforted here, whereas you are tormented. Moreover, between us and you a great chasm is established to prevent

anyone from crossing who might wish to go from our side to yours or from your side to ours.' He said, 'Then I beg you, Father, send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they too come to this place of torment.' But Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.' He said, 'Oh no, Father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' Then Abraham said, 'If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead.'"

Reflection

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

- Luke 16: 19-21: The situation of the rich man and the poor man. The two extremes of society. On the one side, aggressive richness; on the other, the poor man without resources, without rights, covered with wounds, without anybody to accept him, to receive him, except the dogs which came to lick his wounds. What separates both of them is the closed door of the rich man's house. For the rich man, there is no acceptance nor pity concerning the poor man at his door. But the poor man has a name; the rich man does not. That is, the poor man has his name written in the book of life, not the rich one. The poor man's name is Lazarus. It means God helps. And through the poor man, God helps the rich man who could have a name in the book of life. But the rich man does not allow himself to be helped by the poor man, because he keeps his door closed. The beginning of this parable is a faithful mirror of what was happening during the time of Jesus and the time of Luke. It is a mirror of everything that is happening today in the world!
- Luke 16: 22: The change which reveals the hidden truth. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels into Abraham's embrace. The rich man also died and was buried. In the parable the poor man dies before the rich one. This is a warning for the rich. During the time when the poor man is alive and at the door, there is still the possibility of salvation for the rich man. But when the poor man dies, the only instrument of salvation for the rich man also dies. Now, the poor man is in Abraham's embrace. The embrace of Abraham is the source of life, where the people of God were born. Lazarus, the poor man, is part of the people of Abraham, from which he was excluded when he was before the rich man's door. The rich man, who believes that he is a son of Abraham, does not go toward Abraham's embrace! The introduction to the parable ends here. Now its significance begins to be revealed, through the three conversations between the rich man and Father Abraham.
- Luke 16: 23-26: The first conversation. In the parable, Jesus opens a window on the other side of life, the side of God. It is not a question of Heaven. It is a question of the life which only faith generates and which the rich man, who has no faith, cannot see. It is only in the light of death that this ideology disintegrates; then appears as what the true value of life is. On the part of God, without the deceptive thinking of the ideology, things change. The rich man sees Lazarus in the arms of Abraham and asks

to be helped in his suffering. The rich man discovers that Lazarus is his only possible benefactor.

But now it is too late! The nameless rich man is pious, because he recognizes Abraham and calls him Father. Abraham responds and calls him son. In reality, this word of Abraham is addressed to all the rich who are alive. In so far as they are alive, they have the possibility of becoming sons and daughters of Abraham if they know how to open the door to Lazarus, the poor man, the only one who in God's name can help them. Salvation for the rich man does not consist in Lazarus giving him a drop of fresh water to refresh his tongue, but rather, that he, the rich man, open the closed door to the poor man so as fill the great abyss that exists.

- Luke 16: 27-29: The second conversation. The rich man insists: "Then, Father, I beg you to send Lazarus to my father's house, because I have five brothers!" The rich man does not want his brothers to end in this place of suffering. Lazarus, the poor man, is the only true intermediary between God and the rich. He is the only one, because it is only to the poor that the rich have to return what they had and, thus, re-establish the justice which has been damaged! The rich man is worried for his brothers but was never concerned about the poor! Abraham's response is clear: "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them!" They have the Bible! The rich man had the Bible. He knew it by heart. But he was never aware that the Bible had something to do with the poor. The rich man's key to understanding the Bible is the poor man sitting at his door!
- Luke 16: 30-31: The third conversation. "No, Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent!" The rich man recognizes that he is wrong, he has committed an error, because he speaks of repenting, something which he never heard during his life. He wants a miracle, a resurrection! But this type of resurrection does not exist. The only resurrection is that of Jesus. Jesus, risen from the dead comes to us in the person of the poor, of those who have no rights, of those who have no land, of those who have no food, of those who have no house, of those who have no health. In his final response, Abraham is clear and convincing: "If they will not listen either to Moses or to the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone should rise from the dead!" The conversation ends this way and is the end of the parable!

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

Personal Questions

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

Concluding Prayer

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