



Lectio Divina

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Monday, March 1, 2021

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Just and holy God, our loving Father, you offered us your hand in friendship, and you sent us your Son Jesus to go with us the road of obedience and loyalty.

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

Gospel Reading - Luke 6: 36-38

“Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and there will be gifts for you: a full measure, pressed down, shaken together, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap; because the standard you use will be the standard used for you.”

Reflection

- These three brief verses of today’s Gospel (Lk 6: 36-38) are the final part of a brief discourse of Jesus (Lk 6: 20-38). In the first part of his discourse, he addresses himself to the disciples (Lk 6: 20) and to the rich (Lk 6: 24) proclaiming four beatitudes for the disciples (Lk 6, 20-23), and four curses for the rich (Lk 6: 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 revenge against the rich. Jesus orders to have the contrary attitude. He says: “Love your enemies!” (Lk 6: 27). The change or the conversion which Jesus wants to bring about in us does not consist in merely turning something to invert the system because in this way nothing would change. He wants to change the system. The Novelty which Jesus wants to construct comes from the new experience that he has of God Father/Mother full of tenderness who accepts all, good and bad, who makes the sunshine on both the good and on the bad and makes the rain fall on both good and bad (Mt 5: 5, 45). True love does not depend nor it can depend on what I receive from others. Love must want the

good of the other independently of what he does for me. Because this is how God's love is for us. He is merciful not only toward those who are good, but with all, even with the "ungrateful and the evil" (Lk 6: 35). The disciples of Jesus should radiate this merciful love.

- Luke 6: 37-38: Do not judge and you will not be judged. These last words repeat in a clearer way what Jesus had said before: "Treat others as you would like them to treat you" (Lk 6: 31; cf. Mt 7: 12). If you do not want to be judged, do not judge! If you do not want to be condemned, do not condemn! If you want to be forgiven, forgive! If you want to receive a good measure, give this good measure to others! Do not wait for the other one to take the initiative, but you take it and begin now! And you will see that it is like this!

Personal Questions

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

Concluding Prayer

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

Tuesday, March 2, 2021

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

Then addressing the crowds and his disciples Jesus said, "The scribes and the Pharisees occupy the chair of Moses. You must therefore do and observe what they tell you; but do not be guided by what they do, since they do not practice what they preach.

They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people's shoulders, but will they lift a finger to move them? Not they! Everything they do is done to attract attention, like wearing broader headbands and longer tassels, like wanting to take the place of honor at banquets and the front seats in the synagogues, being greeted respectfully in the

market squares and having people call them Rabbi. You, however, must not allow yourselves to be called Rabbi, since you have only one Master, and you are all brothers. You must call no one on earth your father, since you have only one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor must you allow yourselves to be called teachers, for you have only one Teacher, the Christ.

The greatest among you must be your servant. Anyone who raises himself up will be humbled, and anyone who humbles himself will be raised up.”

Reflection

- Today’s Gospel presents the criticism of Jesus against the Scribes and the Pharisees of his time. At the beginning of the missionary activity of Jesus, the Doctors of Jerusalem went to Galilee to observe him (Mk 3: 22; 7: 1). Disturbed by Jesus’ preaching, they had based their calumny saying that he was possessed (Mk 3: 22). All along the three years the popularity of Jesus grew. And at the same time, the conflict between he and the religious authority also grew. The origin of this conflict was the way in which they placed themselves before God. The Pharisees sought their own security, not so much in God’s love toward them, but rather in the rigorous observance of the Law. Before this mentality, Jesus insists on the practice of love which makes the observance of the law relative and gives it its true significance.
- Matthew 23: 1-3: The root or origin of the criticism: “They say but they do not do”. Jesus recognizes the authority of the Scribes and of the Pharisees. They occupy the chair of Moses and teach the law of God, but they themselves do not observe what they teach. So, Jesus tells them: “You must, therefore, do and observe what they tell you, but do not do as they do, because they say but do not do!” This is a terrible criticism! Immediately, like in a mirror, Jesus shows some aspects of the incoherence of the religious authority.
- Matthew 23: 4-7: Look in the mirror in order to make a revision of life. Jesus calls the attention of the disciples concerning the incoherent behavior of some doctors of the Law. In meditating on this incoherence, it is convenient to think not in the Pharisees and the Scribes of that time already past, but rather in ourselves and in our incoherence: they tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people’s shoulders but will not lift a finger to move them; they do their works in order to be admired; they love to take the first places and to be called doctors. The Scribes liked to enter 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 as being more important before others, he asks not to use the title of Rabbi or Teacher, of Master, Father and Guide because only one is the Guide, Christ; only God in Heaven is Father, and Jesus is the Master, the Teacher. You are all brothers. This is the basis of the fraternity which comes from the certainty that God is our Father.

- Matthew 23: 11-12: The final summary: the greatest must be the servant. This phrase is what characterizes both the teaching and the 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?
- Have you already seen in the mirror?

Concluding Prayer

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

Wednesday, March 3, 2021

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

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

Gospel Reading - Matthew 20: 17-28

Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, and on the road, he took the Twelve aside by themselves and said to them, 'Look, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of man is about to be handed over to the chief priests and scribes. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the gentiles to be mocked and scourged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised up again.'

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

When the other ten heard this, they were indignant with the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, 'You know that among the gentiles the rulers lord it over them, and great men make their authority felt. Among you this is not to happen. No;

anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

Reflection

- Today's Gospel presents three points: the third announcement of the Passion (Mt 20: 17-19), the petition of the Mother of the sons of Zebedee (Mt 20: 20-23) and the discussion of the disciples regarding the first place (Mt 20: 24-28).
- Matthew 20: 17-19: The third announcement of the Passion. Going toward Jerusalem, Jesus walks in front of them. He knows that he is going to be killed. The Prophet Isaiah had already announced it (Is 50: 4-6; 53: 1-10). His death is not the fruit of a plan established in advance, but the consequence of the commitment taken concerning the mission received from the Father, to be at the side of the excluded of his time. This is why Jesus speaks to the disciples about the tortures and death that he will have to face in Jerusalem. The disciple should follow the Master, even if he has to suffer like him. The disciples are frightened and accompany him with fear. They do not understand what is happening (cfr. Lk 18: 34). Suffering did not correspond to the idea that they had of the Messiah (cfr. Mt 16: 21-23).
- Matthew 20: 20-21: The petition of the mother to obtain the first place for her sons. The disciples do not only not understand the importance and significance of the message of Jesus, but they continue with their own personal ambitions. When Jesus insists on service and the gift of oneself, they continue to ask for the first places in the Kingdom. The mother of James and John, taking her sons with her, gets close to Jesus. The two did not understand the proposal of Jesus. They were concerned only about their own interests. This is a sign that the dominating ideology of that time had profoundly penetrated in the mentality of the disciples. In spite of the fact of having lived with Jesus several years, they had not renewed their way of seeing things. They looked at Jesus as always, with the same look. They wanted a reward for the fact of following Jesus. The same tensions existed in the communities of the time of Matthew and they still exist today in our own communities.
- Matthew 20: 22-23: Jesus' answer. Jesus reacts firmly: "You do not know what you are asking for!" And he asks if they are capable of drinking the chalice that he, Jesus, will drink and if they are ready to receive the baptism which he will receive. It is the chalice of suffering, the baptism of blood! Jesus wants to know if they, instead of the places of 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 submitted with the force of the arms and in this way, through tributes, taxes, succeeded in concentrating the riches of the people in the hands of a few in Rome. Society was characterized by the repressive and abusive exercise of power. Jesus had an altogether different proposal. He said: "It should not be like that among you; but the one who wants to become great among you, should become a servant, and the one who wants to be the first one among you, will become your slave!" He teaches against privileges and rivalry. He wants to change the system and insists on the fact that service is the remedy against personal ambition.

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

Personal Questions

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

Concluding Prayer

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

Thursday, March 4, 2021

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

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

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

Gospel Reading - Luke 16: 19-31

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

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

Reflection

- Every time that Jesus has something important to communicate, he creates a story and tells a parable. In this way, through the reflection on an invisible reality, he leads those who listen to him to discover the invisible call of God, who is present in life. A parable is made to make us think and reflect. For this reason, it is important to pay attention even to the smallest details. In the parable in today's Gospel there are three persons. The poor Lazarus, the rich man without a name and Father Abraham. In the parable, Abraham represents the thought of God. The rich man without a name represents the dominating ideology of that time. Lazarus represents the silent cry of the poor of the time of Jesus and of all times.
- Luke 16: 19-21: The situation of the rich man and the poor man. The two extremes of society. On the one side, aggressive richness, on the other the poor man without resources, without rights, covered with wounds, without anybody to accept him, to receive him, except the dogs which came to lick his wounds. What separates both of them is the closed door of the house of the rich man. On the part of the rich man, there is no acceptance nor pity concerning the problem of the poor man at his door. But the poor man has a name, and the rich man does not. That is, the poor man has his name written in the book of life, not the rich one. The poor man's name is Lazarus. It means God helps. And through the poor man, God helps the rich man who could have a name in the book of life. But the rich man does not accept to be helped by the poor man, because he keeps his door closed. This beginning of the parable which describes the situation, is a faithful mirror of what was happening during the time of Jesus and the time of Luke. It is the mirror of everything which is happening today in the world!

- Luke 16: 22: The change which reveals the hidden truth. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels into Abraham's embrace. The rich man also died and was buried. In the parable the poor man dies before the rich one. This is an advertisement for the rich. Up to the time when the poor man is alive and is at the door, there is still the possibility of salvation for the rich man. But after the poor man dies, the only instrument of salvation for the rich man also dies. Now, the poor man is in Abraham's embrace. The embrace of Abraham is the source of life, from where the People of God is born, Lazarus, the poor man, forms part of the People of Abraham, from which he was excluded, when he was before the door of the rich man. The rich man who believes that he is a son of Abraham does not go toward the embrace of Abraham! The introduction of the parable ends here. Now its significance begins to be revealed, through the three conversations between the rich man and Father Abraham.
- Luke 16: 23-26: The first conversation. In the parable, Jesus opens a window on the other side of life, the side of God. It is not a question of Heaven. It is a question of life which only faith generates and which the rich man who has no faith cannot perceive. It is only in the light of death that the ideology of the empire disintegrates and appears for him what the true value of life is. On the part of God, without the deceiving propaganda of the ideology, things change. The rich man sees Lazarus in the embrace of Abraham and asks to be helped in his suffering. The rich man discovers that Lazarus is his only possible benefactor. But now, it is too late! The rich man without a name is pious, because he recognizes Abraham and calls him Father Abraham responds and calls him son. In reality this word of Abraham is addressed to all the rich who are alive. In so far as they are alive, they have the possibility to become sons and daughters of Abraham, if they know how to open the door to Lazarus, the poor man, the only one who in God's name can help them. Salvation for the rich man does not consist in Lazarus giving him a drop of fresh water to refresh his tongue, but rather, that he, the rich man, open the closed door to the poor man so as fill the great abyss that exists.
- Luke 16: 27-29: The second conversation. The rich man insists: "Then, Father, I beg you to send Lazarus to my father's house, because I have five brothers!" The rich man does not want his brothers to end in the same place of suffering. Lazarus, the poor man, is the only true intermediary between God and the rich. He is the only one, because it is only to the poor that the rich have to return what they had and, thus, re-establish the justice which has been damaged! The rich man is worried for his brothers, but was never concerned about the poor! Abraham's response is clear: "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them!" They have the Bible! The rich man had the Bible. He knew it by heart. But he was never aware of the fact that the Bible had something to do with the poor. The key which the rich man has in order to be able to understand the Bible is the poor man sitting at his door!
- Luke 16: 30-31: The third conversation. "No, Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent!" The rich man recognizes that he is wrong, he has committed an error, because he speaks of repenting, something which he never heard during his life. He wants a miracle, a resurrection! But this type of resurrection does not exist. The only resurrection is that of Jesus. Jesus, risen from the dead comes

to us in the person of the poor, of those who have no rights, of those who have no land, of those who have no food, of those who have no house, of those who have no health. In his final response, Abraham is clear and convincing, forceful: "If they will not listen either to Moses or to the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone should rise from the dead!" The conversation ends this way! This is the end of the parable!

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

Personal Questions

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

Concluding Prayer

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

Friday, March 5, 2021

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

God, we do not want to die; we want to live. We want to be happy but without paying the price. We belong to our times, when sacrifice and suffering are out of fashion. God, make life worth the pain to be lived.

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

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

Jesus said to the chief priests and the elders of the people: 'Listen to another parable. There was a man, a landowner, who planted a vineyard; he fenced it round, dug a winepress in it and built a tower; then he leased it to tenants and went abroad.

When vintage time drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his servants, thrashed one, killed another and stoned a third.

Next he sent some more servants, this time a larger number, and they dealt with them in the same way.

Finally, he sent his son to them thinking, "They will respect my son." But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, "This is the heir. Come on, let us kill him and take over his inheritance." So they seized him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' They answered, 'He will bring those wretches to a wretched end and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will deliver the produce to him at the proper time.'

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

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

Reflection

- The text of today's Gospel forms part of a whole which is more vast or extensive which includes Mathew 21: 23-40. The chief priests and the Elders had asked Jesus with which authority he did those things (Mt 21: 23). They considered themselves the patrons of everything and they did not want anybody to do things without their permission. The answer of Jesus is divided into three parts: 1) He, in turn, asks them a question because he wants to know from them if John the Baptist was from heaven or from earth (Mt 21: 24-27). 2) He then tells them the parable of the two sons (Mt 21: 28-32). 3) He tells them the parable of the vineyard (Mt 21: 33-46) which is today's Gospel.
- Mathew 21: 33-40: The parable of the vineyard. Jesus begins as follows: "Listen to another parable: There was a man, a landowner, who planted a vineyard, he fenced it around, dug a winepress in it and built a tower". The parable is a beautiful summary of the history of Israel, taken from the prophet Isaiah (Is 5: 1-7). Jesus addresses himself to the chief priests, to the elders (Mt 21: 23) and to the Pharisees (Mt 21: 45) and He gives a response to the question which they addressed to him asking about the origin of his authority (Mt 21: 23). Through this parable, Jesus clarifies several things: (a) He reveals the origin of his authority: He is the Son, the heir. (b) He denounces the abuse of the authority of the tenants, that is of the priests and elders

who were not concerned and did not take care of the people of God. (c) He defends the authority of the prophets, sent by God, but who were killed by the priests and the elders. (4) He unmasks the authority by which they manipulate the religion and kill the Son, because they do not want to lose the source of income which they succeed to accumulate for themselves, throughout the centuries.

- Mathew 21: 41: The sentence which they give to themselves. At the end of the parable Jesus asks: “Now, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants? They are not aware that the parable was speaking precisely of them. This is why, with the response that they give, they decree their own condemnation: “The chief priests and the elders of the people answered: “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will deliver the produce to him at the proper time.” Several times Jesus uses this same method. He leads the person to say the truth about himself, without being aware that he condemns himself. For example, in the case of the Pharisee who condemns the young woman considering her a sinner (Luke 7: 42-43) and in the case of the parable of the two sons (Mt 21: 28-32).
- Mathew 21: 42-46: The sentence given by themselves was confirmed by their behavior. From the clarification given by Jesus, the chief priests, the elders and the Pharisees understand that the parable speaks about them, but they do not convert. All the contrary! They keep to their own project to kill Jesus. They will reject “the corner stone”. But they do not have the courage to do it openly, because they fear the reaction of the people.
- The diverse groups which held the power at the time of Jesus. In today’s Gospel two groups appear which, at that time, governed: the priests, the elders and the Pharisees. Then, some brief information on the power which each of these groups and others had is given:
 - o The priests: They were the ones in charge of the worship in the Temple. The people took to the Temple the tithe and the other taxes and offerings to pay the promises made. The High Priest occupied a very important place in the life of the nation, especially after the exile. He was chosen and appointed from among the three or four aristocratic families who possessed more power and riches.
 - o The elders or the Chief Priests of the People: They were the local leaders in the different villages of the city. Their origin came from the heads of the ancient tribes.
 - o The Sadducees: they were the lay aristocratic elite of society. Many of them were rich merchants or landlords. From the religious point of view they were conservative. They did not accept the changes supported by the Pharisees, for example, faith in the resurrection and the existence of the angels.
 - o The Pharisees: Pharisee means separated. They struggled in a way that through the perfect observance of the Law of purity, people would succeed in being pure, separated and saint as the Law and Tradition demanded! Because

of the exemplary witness of their life according to the norms of the time, their moral authority was greatly extended in the villages of Galilee.

- o Scribe or doctor of the Law: They were the ones in charge of teaching. They dedicated their life to the study of the Law of God and taught people what to do to observe all the Law of God. Not all the Scribes belonged to the same line. Some were united with the Pharisees, others with the Sadducees.

Personal Questions

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

Concluding Prayer

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

Saturday, March 6, 2021

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

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

When mercy and pardon sound paternalistic to modern ears, make us realize, Lord, that you challenge us to face ourselves and to become new people, responsible for the destiny of ourselves and for the happiness of others.

Make us responsive to your love through Christ Jesus our Lord.

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

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

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

When he had spent it all, that country experienced a severe famine, and now he began to feel the pinch; so, he hired himself out to one of the local inhabitants who put him on his farm to feed the pigs. And he would willingly have filled himself with the husks

the pigs were eating but no one would let him have them. Then he came to his senses and said, "How many of my father's hired men have all the food they want and more, and here am I dying of hunger! I will leave this place and go to my father and say: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired men." So, he left the place and went back to his father.

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

Now the elder son was out in the fields, and on his way back, as he drew near the house, he could hear music and dancing. Calling one of the servants he asked what it was all about. The servant told him, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the calf we had been fattening because he has got him back safe and sound." He was angry then and refused to go in, and his father came out and began to urge him to come in; but he retorted to his father, "All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any orders of yours, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends. But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property -- he and his loose women -- you kill the calf we had been fattening."

The father said, "My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours. But it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found."

Reflection

- Chapter 15 of Luke's Gospel is enclosed in the following information: "The tax collectors and sinners, were all crowding round to listen to him, and the Pharisees and Scribes complained saying: This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Lk 15: 1-3). Immediately Luke presents these three parables which are bound together by the same theme: the lost sheep (Lk 15: 4-7), the lost drachma (Lk 15: 8-10), the lost son (Lk 15: 11-32). This last parable constitutes the theme of today's Gospel.
- Luke 15: 11-13: The decision of the younger son. A man had two sons. The younger one asks for the part of the estate which will be his. The father divides everything between the two and both receive their part. To receive the inheritance is not any merit of ours. It is a gratuitous gift.
- The inheritance of the gifts of God is distributed among all human beings, whether Jewish or Pagans, whether Christians or non-Christians. All receive something of the inheritance of the Father. But not all take care of it in the same way. In this same way, the younger son leaves and goes to a distant country and squandered his money on a life of debauchery, getting away from the Father. At the time of Luke, the elder one

represented the communities which came from Judaism, and the youngest represented, the communities from Paganism. And today who is the youngest and who the less young?

- Luke 15: 14-19: The disillusionment and the will to return to the Father's home. The need to find some food makes the young man lose his freedom and he becomes a slave and takes care of the pigs. This was the condition of life of millions of slaves in the Roman Empire at the time of Luke. The situation in which he finds himself makes the young man remember how he was in his Father's home. Finally, he prepares the words which he will say to his Father: "I no longer deserve to be called your son! Treat me as one of your hired men!" The hired man executes the orders, fulfils the law of servants. The younger son wants to fulfil the law as the Pharisees and the Scribes of the time of Jesus wanted (Lk 15: 1). The missionaries of the Pharisees accused the Pagans who were converted to the God of Abraham (Mt 23: 15). At the time of Luke, some Christians who came from Judaism, submitted themselves to the yoke of the Law (Ga 1: 6-10).
- Luke 15: 20-24: The joy of the Father when he meets his younger son again. The parable says that the younger son was still a long way off from the house, but the Father sees him, and runs to the boy, clasps him in his arms and kissed him. The impression given by Jesus is that the Father remained all the time at the window to see if his son would appear around the corner. According to our human way of thinking and feeling, the joy of the Father seems exaggerated. He does not even allow his son to finish his words, what he was saying. Nobody listens! The Father does not want his son to be his slave. He wants him to be his son! This is the great Good News which Jesus has brought to us! A new robe, new sandals, a ring on his finger, the calf, the feast! In the immense joy of the encounter, Jesus allows us to see how great the sadness of the Father is because of the loss of his son. God was very sad, and the people now become aware of this, seeing the immense joy of the Father because of the encounter with his son! It is joy shared with all in the feast that he has prepared.
- Luke 15: 25-28b: The reaction of the older son. The older son returns from his work in the fields and finds that there is a feast in the house. He refuses to enter. He wants to know what is happening. When he is told the reason for the feast, he is very angry and does not want to go in. Closing up in himself, he thinks he has his own right. He does not like the feast and he does not understand the why of his Father's joy. This is a sign that he did not have a great intimacy with the Father, in spite of the fact that they lived in the same House. In fact, if he would have had it, he would have remarked the sadness of the Father for the loss of his younger son and would have understood his joy when his son returned. Those who live very worried about the observance of the Law of God, run the risk of forgetting God himself! The young son, even being far away from home, seemed to know the Father better than the older son who lived with him. Because the younger one had the courage to go back home to his Father, while the older one no longer wants to enter the house of the Father. He is not aware that the Father without him, will lose his joy. Because he, the older son, is also son as much as the younger one!

- Luke 15: 28a-30: The attitude of the Father and the response of the older son. The Father goes out of the house and begs the older son to enter into the house. But he answers: "All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any orders of yours, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends. But for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property, he and his loose women, you kill the calf we had been fattening." The older son also wants feast and joy, but only with his own friends. Not with his brother and much less with his Father, and he does not even call brother his own brother, but rather "this your son," as if he were no longer his brother. And he, the older brother, speaks about prostitutes. It is his malice which makes him interpret the life of his younger brother in this way. How many times the older brother interprets badly the life of the younger brother. How many times, we Catholics interpret badly the life and the religion of others! The attitude of the Father is the contrary! He accepts the younger son but does not want to lose the older son. Both of them form part of the family. One cannot exclude the other!
- Luke 15: 31-32: The final response of the Father. In the same way, like the Father who does not pay attention to the arguments of the younger son, in the same way he does not pay attention to those of the older son and he says: "My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours, but it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found!" Is it that the older son was really aware that he was always with his Father and to find in his presence the reason for his joy? The expression of the Father: "All I have is yours!" includes also the younger son who has returned! The older brother does not have the right to make a distinction, and if he wants to be the son of the Father, he has to accept him as he is and not as he would like the Father to be! The parable does not say which was the final response of the older brother. It is up to the older son, whom we are, to give it!
- The one who experiences the gratuitous and surprising irruption of the love of God in his life becomes joyful and wishes to communicate this joy to others. The salvation action of God is a source of joy: "Rejoice with me!" (Lk 15: 6, 9). And from this experience of God's gratuitousness emerges the sense of feast and joy (Lk 15: 32). At the end of the parable, the Father asks to be happy and to celebrate, to feast. The joy is threatened by the older son, who does not want to enter. He thinks he has the right to joy only with his own friends and does not want to share the joy with all the members of the same human family. He represents those who consider themselves just and observant, and who think that they do not need any conversion.

Personal Questions

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

Concluding Prayer

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

Sunday, March 7, 2021

Third Sunday of Lent

The purification of the temple Jesus, the new temple

John 2: 13-25

Opening Prayer

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

Reading

- Context and structure:

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

The development of our little story is quite simple. Verse 13 places in a framework a context of space and time that is very precise and significant: Jesus goes to Jerusalem for the Paschal feast. Verse 14 introduces the scene that provokes a strong reaction on the part of Jesus. Jesus' action is described in verse 15 and is caused by Jesus himself in verse 16. Jesus' action and words in turn provoke two reactions. First, that of the disciples, one of admiration (v. 17); secondly, that of the "Jews", one of dissent and indignation (v. 18). They want an explanation from Jesus (v. 19) but they are not open to receive this (v. 20). At this point the narrator intervenes to interpret Jesus' words authentically (v. 21). "The Jews" cannot understand the real meaning of Jesus' word. However, also the disciples, who admire him as a prophet full of zeal for God, cannot grasp the meaning now. It is only after the fulfilment that they will believe in Jesus' word (v. 22). Finally, the narrator offers us a brief account of Jesus'

reception by the crowds in Jerusalem (vv. 23-25). Yet, this faith, founded only on his signs, does not enthuse Jesus.

- The text:

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the moneychangers at their business. ¹⁵ And making a whip of cords, he drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple; and he poured out the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; you shall not make my Father's house a house of trade." ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for thy house will consume me." ¹⁸ The Jews then said to him, "What sign have you to show us for doing this?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But he spoke of the temple of his body. ²² When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.

²³ Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs which he did; ²⁴ but Jesus did not trust himself to them, ²⁵ because he knew all men and needed no one to bear witness of man; for he himself knew what was in man.

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

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

Some Questions

- Am I able to trust myself completely in God's hands in an act of faith or do I ask for signs?
- God gives me many signs of his presence in my life. Am I capable of seeing and accepting them?
- Am I satisfied with exterior worship or do I try to offer God the worship of my obedience in my daily life?
- Who is Jesus for me? Am I aware that only in him and through him is it possible to meet God?

A Key to the Reading

for those who wish to go deeper into the theme.

- "The Jews"

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

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

- The Signs

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

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

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

- Jesus, New Temple

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

Za 14: 23 and Mi 3: 1 for the action of the coming "Messiah" in this context). The disciples admire him for this and immediately think that for this attitude he will have to pay personally like Jeremiah (see Jer 26: 1-15) and other prophets. But in John's Gospel, Jesus' action is more than just a prophetic gesture of zeal for God. It is a sign that prefigures and proclaims the great sign of the death and resurrection of Jesus. More than just a purification, that which Jesus does is to abolish the temple and the cult there celebrated, because from now on the place of the presence of God is the glorified body of Jesus (see Jn 1: 51; 4: 23).

Psalm 50

The cult according to God's will

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

Our God comes, he does not keep silence, before him is a devouring fire,
round about him a mighty tempest.

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

"Gather to me my faithful ones,
who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!" The heavens declare his righteousness,
for God himself is judge!

"Hear, O my people, and I will speak,

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

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

For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds
of the air,

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

or drink the blood of goats?

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

I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me." But to the wicked God says:

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

For you hate discipline, and you cast my words behind you.

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

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

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

But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you. "Mark this, then, you who forget God, lest I rend, and there be none to deliver!

He who brings thanksgiving as his sacrifice honors me; to him who orders his way aright

I will show the salvation of God!"

Closing Prayer

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

Monday, March 8, 2021

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Just and holy God, our loving Father,

you offered us your hand in friendship and you sent us your Son Jesus to go with us the road of obedience and loyalty. God, we often hurt this friendship, we act as if we were not your sons and daughters.

See the look of shame on our faces. Forgive us, for we count on you. Accept our thanks for continuing to take us as we are and loving us notwithstanding our sins.

We ask you this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Luke 4: 24-30

And Jesus went on, "In truth I tell you, no prophet is ever accepted in his own country."

"There were many widows in Israel, I can assure you, in Elijah's day, when heaven remained shut for three years and six months and a great famine raged throughout the land, but Elijah was not sent to any one of these: he was sent to a widow at Zarephath, a town in Sidonia. And in the prophet Elisha's time there were many suffering from virulent skin-diseases in Israel, but none of these was cured -- only Naaman the Syrian."

When they heard this everyone in the synagogue was enraged. They sprang to their

feet and hustled him out of the town; and they took him up to the brow of the hill their town was built on, intending to throw him off the cliff, but he passed straight through the crowd and walked away.

Reflection

- Today's Gospel (Lk 4: 24-30) forms part of a larger part (Lk 4: 14-32) Jesus had presented his program in the Synagogue of Nazareth, using a text from Isaiah which spoke about the poor, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed (Is 61: 1-2) and which mirrored the situation of the people of Galilee at the time of Jesus. In the name of God, Jesus takes a stand and defines his mission: to proclaim the Good News to the poor, to proclaim liberation to prisoners, to give back their sight to the blind, to restore liberty to the oppressed. After finishing the reading, he updated the text and says: "Today this text is being fulfilled even while you are listening!" (Lk 4: 21). All those present were astonished (Lk 4: 16, 22b). But immediately after there was a reaction of discredit. The people in the Synagogue were scandalized and did not want to know anything about Jesus. They said: "Is he not the son of Joseph?" (Lk 4: 22b). Why were they scandalized? Which is the reason for this unexpected reaction?
- Because Jesus quoted the text of Isaiah only to the part that says: "to proclaim a year of favor from the Lord", and he omits the end of the sentence which says: "to proclaim a day of vengeance for our God" (Is 61: 2). The people of Nazareth remained surprised because Jesus omitted the phrase on vengeance. They wanted the Good News of the liberation of the oppressed to be an action of vengeance on the part of God against the oppressors. In this case the coming of the Kingdom would be only a superficial change, and not a change or conversion of the system. Jesus does not accept this way of thinking. His experience of God the Father helps him to understand better the significance of the prophecies. He takes away the vengeance. The people of Nazareth do not accept that proposal and the authority of Jesus begins to diminish: "Is he not Joseph's son?"
- Luke 4: 24: No prophet is ever accepted in his own country. The people of Nazareth were jealous because of the miracles which Jesus had worked in Capernaum, because he had not worked them in Nazareth. Jesus answers: "No prophet is ever accepted in his own country!" In fact, they did not accept the new image of God which Jesus communicated to them through this new and freer interpretation of Isaiah. The message of the God of Jesus went beyond the limits of the race of the Jews and opened itself to accept the excluded and the whole humanity.
- Luke 4: 25-27: Two stories of the Old Testament. In order to help the community to overcome the scandal and to understand the universality of God, Jesus uses two well-known stories of the Old Testament: one of Elijah and the other one of Elisha. Through these stories he criticized the people of Nazareth who were so closed up in themselves. Elijah was sent to the foreign widow of Zarephah (1 Kg 17: 7-16). Elisha was sent to take care of the foreigner of Syria (2 Kg 5:14).
- Luke 4: 28-30: They intended to throw him off the cliff, but he passed straight through the crowd and walked away. What Jesus said did not calm down the people.

On the contrary! The use of these two passages of the Bible also caused them to get angrier. The community of Nazareth reached the point of wanting to kill Jesus. And thus, at the moment in which he presented his project to accept the excluded, Jesus himself was excluded! But he remained calm! The anger of the others did not succeed to make him change his mind. In this way, Luke indicates that it is difficult to overcome the mentality of privilege which is closed up in itself. And he showed that the polemic attitude of the Pagans already existed in the time of Jesus. Jesus had the same difficulty which the Hebrew community had in the time of Luke.

Personal Questions

- Is Jesus' program also my program, our program? Is my attitude that of Jesus or that of the people of Nazareth?
- Who are those excluded whom we should accept better in our community?

Concluding Prayer

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

Tuesday, March 9, 2021

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord God,

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

Gospel Reading - Matthew 18: 21-35

Then Peter went up to him and said, 'Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?' Jesus answered, 'Not seven, I tell you, but seventy-seven times. 'And so, the kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who decided to settle his accounts with his servants. When the reckoning began, they brought him a man who owed ten thousand talents; he had no means of paying, so his master gave orders that he should be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, to meet the debt. At this, the servant threw himself down at his master's feet, with the words, "Be patient with me and I will pay the whole sum." And the servant's master felt so sorry for him that he let him go and cancelled the debt.

Now as this servant went out, he happened to meet a fellow servant who owed him one hundred denarii; and he seized him by the throat and began to throttle him, saying, "Pay what you owe me." His fellow-servant fell at his feet and appealed to him, saying, "Be patient with me and I will pay you." But the other would not agree; on the contrary, he had him thrown into prison till he should pay the debt. His fellow-servants were deeply distressed when they saw what had happened, and they went to their master and reported the whole affair to him. Then the master sent for the man and said to him, "You wicked servant, I cancelled all that debt of yours when you appealed to me. Were you not bound, then, to have pity on your fellow-servant just as I had pity on you?" And in his anger the master handed him over to the torturers till he should pay all his debt. And that is how my heavenly Father will deal with you unless you each forgive your brother from your heart.'

Reflection

- Today's Gospel speaks to us about the need for pardon. It is not easy to forgive, because certain grief and pain continue to burn the heart. There are persons who say: "I forgive, but I do not forget!" Rancor, tensions, diverse opinions, insults, offences, provocations, all this renders pardon and reconciliation difficult. Let us try to meditate on the words of Jesus which speak about reconciliation (Mt 18: 21-22) and which speak to us about the parable of pardon without limits (Mt 18: 23-35).
- Matthew 18: 21-22: To forgive seventy times seven! Jesus had spoken of the importance of pardon and of the need of knowing how to accept the brothers and sisters to help them to reconcile themselves with the community (Mt 18: 15-20) Before these words of Jesus, Peter asks: "How often should I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?" Number seven indicates perfection. In this case, it was synonymous of always. Jesus goes far beyond the proposal of Peter. He eliminates any possibility of limitation to pardon: "Not seven I tell you, but seventy-seven times!" That is, seventy times always! Because there is no proportion between the pardon which we receive from God and the pardon which we should offer to the brother, as the parable of pardon without limit teaches us.
- The expression seventy-seven times was a clear reference to the words of Lamech who said: "I killed a man for wounding me, a boy for striking me. Sevenfold vengeance for Cain but seventy- sevenfold for Lamech" (Gen 4: 23-24). Jesus wants to invert the spiral of violence which entered the world because of the disobedience of Adam and Eve, because of the killing of Abel by Cain and for the vengeance of Lamech. When uncontrolled violence invades life, everything goes wrong and life disintegrates itself. The Deluge arrived and the Tower of Babel appeared for universal dominion (Gen 2: 1 to 11: 32).
- Matthew 18: 23-35: The parable of pardon without limits. The debt of ten thousand talents was approximately around 164 tons of gold. The debt of one hundred denarii was worth about 30 grams of gold. There is no comparison between the two! Even if the debtor together with his wife and children set to work their whole life, they would never be capable to get 164 tons of gold. Before God's love which forgives

gratuitously our debt of 164 tons of gold, is more than just on our part to forgive gratuitously the debt of 30 grams of gold, seventy times always! The only limit to the gratuity of pardon of God is our incapacity to forgive our brother! (Mt 18: 34; 6: 15).

- The community, an alternative space of solidarity and of fraternity: the society of the Roman Empire was hard and without a heart, without any space for the little ones. They sought refuge for the heart and did not find it. The Synagogue was also demanding and did not offer them any place. And in the Christian communities, the rigor of some in the observance of the Law made life together difficult because they used the same criteria of the Synagogue. Besides this, toward the end of the first century, in the Christian communities began to appear the same divisions which existed in society between rich and poor (Jm 2: 1-9). Instead of making of the community a space of acceptance, they ran the risk of becoming a place of condemnation and conflict. Matthew wants to enlighten the communities, in such a way that these be an alternative space of solidarity and of fraternity. They should be Good News for the poor.

Personal Questions

- Why is it so difficult to forgive?
- In our community is there a space for reconciliation? How?

Concluding Prayer

Direct me in your ways, Yahweh, and teach me your paths. Encourage me to walk in your truth and teach me since you are the God who saves me. For my hope is in you all day long. (Ps 25: 4-5)

Wednesday, March 10, 2021

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,

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

We ask you this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 5: 17-19

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

Therefore, anyone who infringes even one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be considered the least in the kingdom of Heaven; but the person who keeps them and teaches them will be considered great in the kingdom of Heaven.”

Reflection

- Today's Gospel (Mt 5: 17-19) teaches how to observe the law of God in such a way that its practice indicates in what its complete fulfilment consists (Mt 5: 17-19). Matthew writes in order to help the communities of the converted Jews to overcome the criticism of the brothers of their own race who accused them saying: You are unfaithful to the Law of Moses.” Jesus himself had been accused of infidelity to the Law of God. Matthew has the clarifying response of Jesus concerning his accusers. Thus, he gives some light to help the communities solve their problems.
- Using images of daily life, with simple and direct words, Jesus had said that the mission of the community, its reason for being, is that of being salt and light! He had given some advice regarding each one of the two images. Then follow two or three brief verses of today's Gospel.
- Matthew 5: 17-18: Not one dot, nor one stroke is to disappear from the Law. There were several different tendencies in the communities of the first Christians. Some thought that it was not necessary to observe the laws of the Old Testament, because we are saved by faith in Jesus and not by the observance of the Law (Rm 3: 21-26). Others accepted Jesus, the Messiah, but they did not accept the liberty of spirit with which some of the communities lived the presence of Jesus. They thought that being Jews they had to continue to observe the laws of the Old Testament (Acts 15: 1, 5). But there were Christians who lived so fully in the freedom of the Spirit, who no longer looked at the life of Jesus of Nazareth, nor to the Old Testament and they even went so far as to say: "Anathema Jesus!" (1 Co 12: 3). Observing these tensions, Matthew tries to find some balance between both extremes. The community should be a space, where the balance can be attained and lived. The answer given by Jesus to those who criticized him continued to be actual for the communities: "I have not come to abolish the law, but to complete it!" The communities could not be against the Law, nor could they close up themselves in the observance of the law. Like Jesus, they should advance, and show, in practice, which was the objective which the law wanted to attain in the life of persons, that is, in the perfect practice of love.
- Matthew 5: 17-18: Not one dot or stroke will disappear from the Law. It is for those who wanted to get rid of all the law that Matthew recalls the other parable of Jesus: "Anyone who infringes even one of the least of these commandments and teaches

others to do the same will be considered the least in the Kingdom of Heaven; but the person who keeps them and teaches them will be considered great in the Kingdom of Heaven". The great concern in Matthew's Gospel is to show that the Old Testament, Jesus of Nazareth and the life in the Spirit cannot be separated. The three of them form part of the same and unique project of God and communicate to us the certainty of faith: The God of Abraham and of Sarah is present in the midst of the community by faith in Jesus of Nazareth who sends us his Spirit.

Personal Questions

- How do I see and live the law of God: as a growing horizon of light or as an imposition which limits my freedom?
- What can we do today for our brothers and sisters who consider all this type of discussion as obsolete and not actual? What can we learn from them?

Concluding Prayer

Praise Yahweh, Jerusalem, Zion, praise your God.

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

Thursday, March 11, 2021

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

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

God, may our ears remain open to your word and our hearts to you and to our brothers and sisters. Do not allow us to forget you, or to place our trust in ourselves.

Make us restless for you through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Luke 11: 14-23

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

Others asked him, as a test, for a sign from heaven; but, knowing what they were thinking, he said to them, "Any kingdom which is divided against itself is heading for ruin, and house collapses against house. So, too, with Satan: if he is divided against himself, how can his kingdom last? - since you claim that it is through Beelzebul that I drive devils out. Now if it is through Beelzebul that I drive devils out, through whom do

your own sons drive them out? They shall be your judges, then. But if it is through the finger of God that I drive devils out, then the kingdom of God has indeed caught you unawares. So long as a strong man fully armed guards his own home, his goods are undisturbed; but when someone stronger than himself attacks and defeats him, the stronger man takes away all the weapons he relied on and shares out his spoil.”

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

Reflection

- Today’s Gospel is that of Luke. We already meditated on the parallel text of Mark (Mk 3: 22- 27) during January.
- Luke 11: 14-16: *The diverse reactions before the expulsion of a devil.* Jesus had expelled a devil which was dumb. The expulsion produced two different reactions. On the one side, the crowd of persons who remain astonished and surprised. The people accept Jesus and believe in him. On the other side, those who do not accept Jesus and do not believe in him. Among the latter, some said that Jesus cast out the devils in the name of Beelzebul, the prince of devils, and others wanted a sign from heaven. Mark says that it was a question of the Scribes who had come from Jerusalem (Mk 3: 22), who were not in agreement with the liberty of Jesus. They wanted to defend the Tradition against the novelty of Jesus.
- Luke 11: 17-22: Jesus’ answer is divided into three parts:
 - o *1st part: Comparison with a divided kingdom.* (vv. 17-18a) Jesus denounces the absurdity of the calumny of the Scribes. To say that he casts out the devils with the help of the prince of the devils means to deny the evidence. It is the same thing as saying that water is dry, and that the sun is darkness. The Doctors of Jerusalem slandered against him because they did not know how to explain the benefits which Jesus fulfilled for the people. They were afraid to lose their leadership. They felt threatened in their authority before the people.
 - o *2nd part: through whom do your own sons drive them out?* (vv. 18b-20) Jesus provokes the accusers and asks: “But if it is through Beelzebul that I drive out devils, in whose name do your disciples drive them out?” Let them respond and explain themselves! “If I drive out the devil through the finger of God, then the Kingdom of God has indeed caught you unawares.”
 - o *3rd part: when someone stronger than himself attacks and defeats him, the stronger one takes away all weapons.* (vv. 21-22) Jesus compares the devil to a strong man. Nobody, except a stronger person, can rob in the house of a strong man: Jesus is the strongest. This is why he succeeds to enter into the house and to get hold of the strong man. He succeeds in driving out the devils. Jesus seizes the strong man and now robs in his house, that is, he liberates the persons who were under the power of evil. The Prophet Isaiah had used the same comparison to describe the coming of the Messiah (Is 49: 24-25). This is

why Luke says that the expulsion of the devil is an evident sign that the Kingdom of God has arrived.

- Luke 11: 23: *Anyone who is not with me is against me.* Jesus ends his response with this phrase: “Anyone who is not with me is against me. And anyone who does not gather in with me throws away.” On another occasion, also regarding the expulsion of a devil, the disciples prevented a man to use the name of Jesus to drive out the devil because he was not one of their group. Jesus answered: “You must not stop him: anyone who is not against you is for you!” (Lk 9: 50) These two phrases seem to be contradictory, but they are not. The phrase in today’s Gospel is said against the enemies who have a preconception against Jesus: “Anyone who is not with me is against me. And anyone who does not gather in with me throws away.” The preconception and the lack of acceptance make dialogue impossible and break the union. The other phrase is said for the disciples who thought they had the monopoly on Jesus. “Anyone who is not against you is for you!” Many persons who are not Christians practice love, goodness, justice, many times in a much better way than Christians. We cannot exclude them. They are brothers and workers in the construction of the Kingdom. We Christians are not the owners of Jesus. On the contrary: Jesus is our Lord!

Personal Questions

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

Concluding Prayer

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

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

Friday, March 12, 2021

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

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

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

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

Gospel Reading - Mark 12: 28-34

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

Jesus replied, 'This is the first: Listen, Israel, the Lord our God is the one, only Lord, and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: You must love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.'

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

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

Reflection

- In today's Gospel (Mk 12: 28b-34), the Scribes and the Doctors of the Law want to know from Jesus which is the greatest commandment of all. Even today, many people want to know what is more important in religion. Some say that it is to be baptized. Others say that it is to go to Mass and to participate in the Sunday Mass. Others still say: to love our neighbor and to struggle for a more just world! Others are concerned only of the appearances and of the tasks in the Church.
- Mark 12: 28: The question of the Doctor of the Law. Sometime before the question of the Scribe, the discussion was with the Sadducees concerning faith in the resurrection (Mk 12: 23- 27). The doctor who had participated in the debate, was pleased with Jesus' answer, he perceived in it his great intelligence and wishes to profit of this occasion to ask a question to clarify something: "Which is the greatest commandment of all?" At that time, the Jews had an enormous amount of norms to regulate the observance of the Ten Commandments of the Law of God. Some said: "All these norms have the same value, because they all come from God. It is not up to us to introduce any distinction in the things of God". Others said: "Some laws are more important than others, and for this reason, they oblige more!" The Doctor wants to know what Jesus thinks.
- Mark 12: 29-31: The response of Jesus. Jesus responds quoting a passage from the Bible to say that the greatest among the commandments is "to love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all our strength!" (Dt 6: 4-5). At the time of Jesus, the pious Jews recited this phrase three times a day: in the morning, at noon and in the evening. It was so well known among them just as the Our Father is among us. And Jesus adds, quoting the Bible again: "The second one is: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lec 19: 18). There is no other greater

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

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

Personal Questions

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

Concluding Prayer

Among the gods there is none to compare with you, for you are great and do marvelous deeds,

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

Saturday, March 13, 2021

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,

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

God, may we come to you in humility and repentance, ready to encounter you in love and to turn your way. Accept us as your sons and daughters, together with Jesus Christ, your Son and our Lord forever.

Gospel Reading - Luke 18: 9-14

Jesus spoke the following parable to some people who prided themselves on being upright and despised everyone else, "Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector.

The Pharisee stood there and said this prayer to himself, 'I thank you, God, that I am not grasping, unjust, adulterous like everyone else, and particularly that I am not like this tax collector here. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes on all I get.'

The tax collector stood some distance away, not daring even to raise his eyes to heaven; but he beat his breast and said, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.'

This man, I tell you, went home again justified; the other did not. For everyone who raises himself up will be humbled, but anyone who humbles himself will be raised up."

Reflection

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

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

- Luke 18: 9: The introduction. The parable is presented by the following phrase: "He spoke the following parable to some people who prided themselves on being upright and despised everyone else!" This phrase is Luke's. It refers to the time of Jesus. But it also refers to our own time. There are always persons and groups of persons who consider themselves upright and faithful and who despise others, considering them ignorant and unfaithful.

- Luke 18: 10-13: The Parable. Two men went up to the Temple to pray: one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. According to the opinion of people at that time, the tax collectors were not considered at all, and they could not address themselves to God because they were impure persons. In the parable, the Pharisee thanks God because he is better than others. His prayer is nothing other than a praise of himself, an exaltation of his good qualities and contempt for others and for the tax collector. The tax collector does not even raise his eyes, but he beats his breast and says: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" He places himself in his own place, that which belongs to him before God.
- Luke 18: 14: The application. If Jesus would have allowed people to express their opinion and say which of the two went home justified, all would have answered: "the Pharisee!" Because at that time, this was the common opinion. Jesus thinks in a different way. For him, the one who returns home justified, in a good relationship with God, is not the Pharisee, but rather the tax collector. Jesus turns all things upside down. It is certain that the religious authority of that time was not pleased with the application which he makes of the parable.
- Jesus prays. Luke informs us, especially, about the life of prayer of Jesus. He presents Jesus in constant prayer. The following is a list of texts of Luke's Gospel, in which Jesus appears in prayer: Lk 2: 46-50; 3: 21; 4: 1-12; 4: 16; 5: 16; 6: 12; 9: 16, 18, 28; 10: 21; 11: 1; 22: 32; 22: 7-14; 22: 40-46; 23: 34; 23: 46; 24: 30). In reading Luke's Gospel, you can find other texts which speak about the prayer of Jesus. Jesus lived in contact with the Father. To do the will of the Father was the breathing of his life (Jn 5: 19). Jesus prayed very much and, insisted so that people and his disciples would do the same, because from the union with God springs truth and the person is able to discover and find self, in all reality and humility. In Jesus prayer was intimately bound to concrete facts of life and to the decisions which he had to take. In order to be faithful to the Father's project, he sought to remain alone with Him in order to listen to Him. Jesus prayed the Psalms. He did it like any other pious Jew and he knew them by heart. Jesus even succeeded in composing his own Psalm. It is the Our Father. His whole life was permanent prayer: "By himself the Son can do nothing; he can do only what he sees the Father doing!" (Jn 5: 19, 30). To him can be applied what the Psalm says: "All I can do is pray!" (Ps 109: 4).

Personal Questions

- Looking into the mirror of this parable, am I like the Pharisee or like the tax collector?
- There are persons who say that they do not know how to pray, but they speak with God all the time. Do you know any persons like this?

Concluding Prayer

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

Sunday, March 14, 2021

*Fourth Sunday of Lent
Jesus, Light of the World
John 3: 14-21*

Opening Prayer

Shaddai, God of the mountain,

You who make of our fragile life the rock of your dwelling place, lead our mind to strike the rock of the desert, so that water may gush to quench our thirst.

May the poverty of our feelings cover us as with a mantle in the darkness of the night and may it open our heart to hear the echo of silence until the dawn, wrapping us with the light of the new morning, may bring us, with the spent embers of the fire of the shepherds of the Absolute who have kept vigil for us close to the divine Master, the flavor of the holy memory.

LECTIO

- The Text:

¹⁴ As Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so must the Son of man be lifted up ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. ¹⁶ For this is how God loved the world: he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but so that through him the world might be saved. ¹⁸ No one who believes in him will be judged; but whoever does not believe is judged already, because that person does not believe in the Name of God's only Son. ¹⁹ And the judgement is this: though the light has come into the world people have preferred darkness to the light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ And indeed, everybody who does wrong hates the light and avoids it, to prevent his actions from being shown up; ²¹ but whoever does the truth comes out into the light, so that what he is doing may plainly appear as done in God.'

A Moment of Silence

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

MEDITATIO

- **Some Questions:**

- God has loved the world so much...: how many judgments and prejudices on an insensitive and far away God. Would this not be, perhaps, because we attribute to him that which instead are our responsibilities?
- Light came into the world, but men have preferred darkness: whoever deludes

himself of not being man and lives from God, cannot choose the light because the illusion would vanish. How much darkness surround my days?

- Whoever does the truth comes out into the light. He is not afraid to show what he is. Man is not asked to be infallible, but simply to be man. Are we capable of living our weakness as a place of encounter and of openness to God and to others, who like myself need to work faithfully in their space and in their time?
- **Key to the Reading:**
- **vv. 14-15.** And “as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so must the Son of man be lifted up so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him”. For the sons of Israel, who were bitten by the poisonous snakes in the desert, Moses offered the possibility of salvation by looking at the bronze serpent. If man succeeds to raise his head and to look on high, God prepares an alternative for him. He does not oblige, he is there, available. The mystery of human liberty, of freedom is the most lovable thing which God could invent! The choice of a look, of an encounter, of a new opportunity... the Son of man in the desert of the world will be raised up on the cross as a sign of salvation for all those who will feel the need to continue to live and will not allow themselves to be bitten by poisonous mistaken choices. Christ is there: cursed is he who has no faith, blessed is he who believes. This is a fruit to be taken, attached to the wood of life. We also, like the Israelites in the desert have been “bitten” by the serpent in Eden, and we need to look at the bronze serpent raised up on the staff of wood not to die: “Whoever believes in him has eternal life”.
- **v. 16.** For, in fact, God has loved the world so much, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life. God loves us with a preferential love, a tangible love, a love which speaks... Could the Father come directly? Yes, but is the love of a Father, who gives his only Son, not greater? Every mother, if she is able to choose, prefers to die herself rather than see her son die. God has loved us so much, to the point of seeing his Son die!
- **v. 17.** *God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but so that through him the world would be saved.* A God capable of a perfect judgment sends the Son not to judge but to be a place of salvation. Truly, it is necessary to set at zero every thought and to place oneself before such a great love. Only the One who loves can “judge” that is “save”. He knows the fragility of the human heart and knows that his image, which has been darkened, has the possibility to return to be clear, it is not necessary to make it anew. The logics of life does not know death: God who is life cannot destroy what he himself has wanted to create, that, in some way, would be to destroy himself.
- **v. 18.** No one who believes in him will be judged; but whoever does not believe is judged already, because that person does not believe in the Name of God’s only Son. Faith is the discriminating element in every existence. Not to believe in the name of the Only Begotten Son: this is already a condemnation, because he who does not accept love excludes himself from love!
- **vv. 19-20.** And the judgment is this: though the light has come into the world, people have preferred darkness to the light because their deeds were evil. And

indeed, everybody who does wrong hates the light and avoids it, to prevent his actions from being shown up. The only judgment by which humanity is invested, is the call to live in the light. When the sun rises, nothing can escape from its ray and the same thing for men. When Christ is born, nobody can escape from this light which inundates everything. But men have constructed their houses to be able to flee from the light of the Love which expands itself everywhere, houses of egoism, houses of opportunity. They have intertwined tunnels and hiding places to freely continue to carry out their deeds. And can a work deprived of light bear fruit? The light of existence has only one source: God. He who withdraws from the light, dies.

- **v. 21.** *But whoever does the truth comes out into the light, so that what he is doing may plainly appear as done in God.* Everything which is under the rays of eternal love, is filled with light, as it happens in nature. It seems that everything smiles when the sun shines. And the things which during the day are familiar and beautiful, at night they take a form which inspires fear by the fact that they are not visible. The sun does not change its form, but it exalts it in its beauty. Whoever lives the truth of himself and accepts his fragility as an ornament of his being a man, is not afraid of light because he has nothing to hide. He knows that as a creature he acts in the logic of limitation, but this does not diminish the greatness of his work because his life is one with eternal truth.

- **Reflection:**

The garden becomes a desert for the man who draws himself away from God. And in the desert of his limitations as man he once again finds the poisonous bites of the serpent. But God does not abandon his children, and when they withdraw away from him, he follows them, ready to intervene when necessary. A serpent, the symbol for healing, is raised every time that the poison weakens the life in man, Christ the Lord. If man prefers to look down to the ground and to remain in the desert of "I do it myself," God, just the same, offers himself to his gaze: as a serpent. as the only way in which man can recognize him. Christ has made himself sin, damned, in order to save his image, in order not to let human life die out. Condemnation does not belong to God; it is man's choice. I am completely free not to live close to the heat. But that means that I will have to look for another type of heat, if I want to warm up. Running the risk of experiencing the cold, fatigue, sickness. God's freedom has a price of condemnation. Only persons who are not intelligent enough do not profit of a gift which is given to them, it is simply foolish not to accept what is best so as not to feel as debtors. In the sphere of love the word "debt" does not exist, because gratuitousness is the only term that can be consulted. And with the word gratuitousness light explodes: everything becomes possible, everything becomes an occasion. Works done in darkness or works done in God: the dirt simulacrum of the faint glittering of false stones are dangerous games for everyone; it is better to go frequently to halls filled by the sunshine of a never finished apprenticeship! At least there life grows and joy fills all things with beauty.

ORATIO

Psalm 35

Sin is the oracle of the wicked in the depths of his heart; there is no fear of God before his eyes. He sees himself with too flattering an eye to detect and detest his guilt; all he says is malicious and deceitful, he has turned his back on wisdom.

To get his way he hatches malicious plots even in his bed; once set on his evil course no wickedness is too much for him. Yahweh, your faithful love is in the heavens, your constancy reaches to the clouds, your saving justice is like towering mountains, your judgements like the mighty deep.

Yahweh, you support both man and beast; how precious, God, is your faithful love.

So the children of Adam take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the bounty of your house, you let them drink from your delicious streams; in you is the source of life, by your light we see the light.

Maintain your faithful love to those who acknowledge you, and your saving justice to the honest of heart. Do not let the foot of the arrogant overtake me or wicked hands drive me away.

There they have fallen, the evil doers, flung down, never to rise again.

CONTEMPLATIO

When holy fear abandons me, Oh Lord, I feel sin which speaks in my heart: these are moments of illusion, moments in which I go to look for my failures, I experience the sense of guilt without end, and all this is useless because I have not understood that it is only in doing good, that the iniquitous and misleading words of evil are extinguished. To be obstinate to evil is an attraction, almost as if this would give me more importance and honor, more value. When I become aware that what you give me and allow me to live, is immense then I perceive the great abyss of your fidelity and I see how your salvation does not know any limits; everything inundates and takes me with it, me who are in your image and all that which you have created for me and to which I have given a name. Truly, your grace is precious. In your house the abundance of protection is in force and pleasure and delight flow like water. If I look through your eyes, Lord, then everything is light. And nothing is now difficult, because my heart, purified from temptation of being God in your place, tells me that I will be God with you. Rivalry, competition, hostility... vanish in the face of your proposal to participate in your divine life. God with you. You, the source of the image and I a reflection of that image! Your love as sap runs through the heart, through the depth of my humanity until I find my origin: in your Name.

Monday, March 15, 2021

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord our God, almighty Father, you want us not to turn to the past to regret it and to mourn over it but to hope in the future, in the new earth and the new heaven.

Give us a firm faith in your Son Jesus Christ, that notwithstanding the shortcomings of our time we may have faith in the future, which you want us to build up with your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 4: 43-54

When the two days were over Jesus left for Galilee. He himself had declared that a prophet is not honored in his own hometown. On his arrival the Galileans received him well, having seen all that he had done at Jerusalem during the festival which they too had attended.

He went again to Cana in Galilee, where he had changed the water into wine. And there was a royal official whose son was ill at Capernaum; hearing that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judaea, he went and asked him to come and cure his son, as he was at the point of death. Jesus said to him, 'Unless you see signs and portents you will not believe!' 'Sir,' answered the official, 'come down before my child dies.' 'Go home,' said Jesus, 'your son will live.' The man believed what Jesus had said and went on his way home; and while he was still on the way his servants met him with the news that his boy was alive. He asked them when the boy had begun to recover. They replied, 'The fever left him yesterday at the seventh hour.' The father realized that this was exactly the time when Jesus had said, 'Your son will live'; and he and all his household believed. His new sign, the second, Jesus performed on his return from Judaea to Galilee.

Reflection

- Jesus had left Galilee, and directed himself toward Judah, in order to arrive to Jerusalem on the occasion of the festival (Jn 4: 45) and, passing through Samaria, he was returning again toward Galilee (Jn 4: 3-4). The observant Jews were forbidden to pass through Samaria, and they could not even speak with the Samaritans (Jn 4: 9). Jesus did not care about these norms which prevented friendship and dialogue. He remained several days in Samaria and many people were converted (Jn 4: 40). After that, he decided to return to Galilee.
- John 4: 43-46^a: The return toward Galilee. Even though Jesus knew that the people of Galilee had a certain reservation toward him, he wished to return to his own hometown. Probably, John refers to how badly Jesus was received, accepted in Nazareth of Galilee. Jesus himself had declared that "No prophet is honored in his own hometown" (Lk 4: 24). But now, before the evidence of what he had done in

Jerusalem, the Galileans change their opinion and received him well. Jesus then returns to Cana where he had worked the first “sign” (Jn 2: 11).

- John 4: 46b-47: The petition of the court official. It is the case of a pagan. A short time before, in Samaria, Jesus had spoken with a Samaritan woman, an heretic person according to the Jews, to whom Jesus revealed his condition of Messiah (Jn 4: 26). And now, in Galilee, he receives a pagan, the official of the king, who was seeking help for his sick son. Jesus does not limit himself to help those of his race only, nor those of his own religion. He is ecumenical and receives all.
- John 4: 48: The answer of Jesus to the court official. The official wanted Jesus to go with him to his house to cure his son. Jesus answered: “Unless you see signs and portents you will not believe!” A harsh and strange answer. Why does Jesus answer in this way? What was wrong with the petition of the official? What did Jesus want to attain through this response? Jesus wants to teach how our faith should be. The official would believe only if Jesus went with him to his house. He wanted to see Jesus curing. In general, this is the attitude that we all have. We are not aware of the deficiency of our faith.
- John 4: 49-50: The official repeats his petition and Jesus repeats the response. In spite of the answer of Jesus, the man does not keep silence and repeats the same petition: “Sir, come down before my child dies!” Jesus continues to keep his stand. He does not respond to the petition and does not go with the man to his house and repeats the same response, but formulated in a different way: “Go home! Your son will live!” Both in the first as well as in the second response, Jesus asks for faith, much faith. He asks that the official believes that his son has already been cured. And the true miracle takes place! Without seeing any sign, nor any portent, the man believes in Jesus’ word and returns home. It should not have been easy. This is the true miracle of faith; to believe without any other guarantee, except the Word of Jesus. The ideal is to believe in the word of Jesus, even without seeing (cf. Jn 20: 29).
- John 4: 51-53: The result of faith in the word of Jesus. When the man was on the way to his home, his servants saw him and ran to meet him to tell him that his son had been cured, that he was alive. He asked them when the boy had begun to recover and discovered that it was exactly the time when Jesus had said: “Your son will live!” He was confirmed in his faith.
- John 4: 54: A summary presented by John, the Evangelist. John ends by saying: “This new sign, the second, Jesus preformed.” John prefers to speak of sign and not of miracle. The word sign recalls something which I see with my eyes, but which only faith can make me discover its profound sense. Faith is like an X-Ray: it makes one discover that which the naked eye cannot see.

Personal Questions

- How do you live your faith? Do you have faith in God’s word or do you only believe in miracles and in sensitive, perceptible experiences?
- Jesus accepts heretics and foreigners. And I, how do I relate with persons?

Concluding Prayer

Make music for Yahweh,

all you who are faithful to him, praise his unforgettable holiness. His anger lasts but a moment, his favor through life;

In the evening come tears, but with dawn cries of joy. (Ps 30: 4-5)

Tuesday, March 16, 2021

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord our God, you have quenched our thirst for life with the water of baptism.

Keep turning the desert of our arid lives into a paradise of joy and peace, that we may bear fruits of holiness, justice and love.

Lord, hear our prayer through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 5: 1-16

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

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

Now that day happened to be the Sabbath, so the Jews said to the man who had been cured, 'It is the Sabbath; you are not allowed to carry your sleeping-mat.' He replied, 'But the man who cured me told me, "Pick up your sleeping-mat and walk around." ' They asked, 'Who is the man who said to you, "Pick up your sleeping-mat and walk around"?' ' The man had no idea who it was, since Jesus had disappeared, as the place was crowded.

After a while Jesus met him in the Temple and said, "Now you are well again, do not sin anymore, or something worse may happen to you."

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

Reflection

- Today's Gospel describes Jesus who cures the paralytic who had waited 38 years for someone to help him get to the water of the pool so as to be healed! Thirty-eight years! Before this total absence of solidarity, what does Jesus do? He transgresses the law of Saturday and cures the paralytic. Today, in poor countries, assistance to sick persons is lacking, people experience the same lack of solidarity. They live in total abandonment, without help or solidarity from anyone.
- John 5: 1-2: Jesus goes to Jerusalem. On the occasion of the Jewish festival, Jesus goes to Jerusalem. There, close to the Temple was a pool with five porticos or corridors. At that time, worship in the Temple demanded much water because of the numerous animals which were sacrificed, especially during the great festivals. This is why, near the Temple there were several cisterns where rainwater was gathered. Some could contain over one thousand liters. Close by, because of the abundance of water, there was a public bathing resort, where crowds of sick people gathered waiting for help or to be healed. Archeology has shown that in the same precincts of the Temple, there was a place where the Scribes taught the Law to students. On one side, the teaching of the Law of God. On the other, the abandonment of the poor. The water purified the Temple, but it did not purify the people.
- John 5: 3-4: The situation of the sick. These sick people were attracted by the water of the bathing resort. They said that an angel would disturb the water and the first one who would enter after the angel disturbed the water, would be cured. In other words, the sick people were attracted by a false hope. Healing was only for one person. Just as the lottery today. Only one person gets the prize! The majority pays and wins nothing. Precisely, in this situation of total abandonment, in the public baths, Jesus meets the sick people.
- John 5: 5-9: Jesus cures a sick man on Saturday. Very close to the place where the observance of the Law of God was taught, a paralytic had been there for 38 years, waiting for someone who would help him to go down to the water to be cured. This fact reveals the total lack of solidarity and of acceptance of the excluded! Number 38 indicated the duration of a whole generation (Dt 2: 14). It is a whole generation which does not succeed to experience solidarity, or mercy. Religion at that time, was not capable to reveal the welcoming and merciful face of God. In the face of this dramatic situation Jesus transgresses the law of Saturday and takes care of the paralytic saying: "Get up, pick up your sleeping-mat and walk around!" The man picked up his mat and started to walk around among the people.
- John 5: 10-13: Discussion of the cured man with the Jews. Immediately after, some Jews arrived and criticized the man who was carrying his sleeping mat on a Saturday. The man did not know who the one who had cured him was. He did not know Jesus. This means that Jesus passing by that place where the poor and the sick were saw that person; he perceived the dramatic situation in which he was and cured him. He does not cure him to convert him, neither so that he would believe in God. He cures him because he wants to help him. He wanted him to experience some love and solidarity through his help and loving acceptance.

- John 5: 14-16: The man meets Jesus again. Going to the Temple, in the midst of the crowds, Jesus meets the same man and tells him: “Now, you are well again, do not sin anymore, or something worse may happen to you”. At that moment, people thought and said: “Sickness is a punishment from God. God is with you!” Once the man is cured, he has to keep from sinning again, so that nothing worse will happen to him! But in his naiveté, the man went to tell the Jews that Jesus had cured him. The Jews began to ask Jesus why he did those things on Saturday. In tomorrow’s Gospel we have what follows.

Personal Questions

- Have I ever had an experience similar to that of the paralytic: to remain for some time without any help? How is the situation regarding assistance to the sick in the place where you live? Do you perceive any signs of solidarity?
- What does this teach us today?

Concluding Prayer

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

Wednesday, March 17, 2021

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Our God and Father, you keep seeking us out with love as passionate as a mother's love, even when we have abandoned you. Give us hope and courage, especially when we feel uncertain.

Reassure us that you want us to live in the security of your love and that you stay with us through your Son Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 5: 17-30

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

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

show him even greater things than these, works that will astonish you.

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

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

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

Do not be surprised at this, for the hour is coming when the dead will leave their graves at the sound of his voice: those who did good will come forth to life; and those who did evil will come forth to judgement. By myself I can do nothing; I can judge only as I am told to judge, and my judging is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me.

Reflection

- The Gospel of John is different from the other three. It reveals a more profound dimension which only faith is able to perceive in the words and gestures of Jesus. The Fathers of the Church would say that the Gospel of John is “*spiritual*”, it reveals what the *Spirit* makes one discover in the words of Jesus (cf. Jn 16: 12-13). A beautiful example of this spiritual dimension of the Gospel of John is the passage which we are going to meditate on today.
- John 5: 17-18: *Jesus explains the profound meaning of the healing of the paralytic.* Criticized by the Jews for having cured on Saturday, Jesus answers: “*My Father still goes on working, and I am at work too!*” The Jews taught that no work could be done on Saturday, because even God had rested and had not worked on the seventh day of creation (Ex 20: 8-11). Jesus affirms the contrary. He says that the Father has always worked ***even until now***. And for this reason, Jesus also works, and even on Saturday. He imitates his Father! For Jesus the work of creation is not finished as yet. God continues to work, unceasingly, day and night, holding up the Universe and all of us. Jesus collaborates with the Father continuing the work of creation in such a way that one day all may be able to enter into the eternal rest that has been promised. The reaction of the Jews was violent. They wanted to kill him for two reasons: because he denied the sense of Saturday and for saying he was equal to God.
- John 5: 19-21: *It is love which allows the creative action of God to shine and be visible.* These verses reveal something of the relationship between Jesus and the Father. Jesus, the Son, lives permanently attentive before the Father. What he sees the Father do, he does it also. Jesus is the reflection of the Father. He is the face of the Father! This total attention of the Son to the Father makes it possible for the love of

the Father to enter totally into the Son and through the Son, carry out his action in the world. The great concern of the Father is that of overcoming death and to give life. It is a way of continuing the creative work of the Father.

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

Personal Questions

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

Concluding Prayer

Yahweh is tenderness and pity, slow to anger, full of faithful love. Yahweh is generous to all, his tenderness embraces all his creatures. (Ps 145: 8-9)

Thursday, March 18, 2021

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord our God, we know, perhaps more in theory than in practice, that You are with us, that You are our God and we Your people. Forgive us, Lord, when we fashion our own gods made in our own image - honor, power, prestige, things to which we are attached and enslaved. Remind us again and again that You are our loyal God, who made us in Your own indelible image and who shows us Your perfect likeness in Jesus Christ, Your Son and our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 5:31-47

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

Reflection

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

for this. It is also necessary that we have the lived experience of faith in the community. Today's Gospel is a typical example of the spiritual and mystical depth of the Gospel of the Beloved Disciple.

- Reciprocal enlightenment between life and faith. Here it is well to repeat what John Cassian says regarding the discovery of the full and profound sense of the psalms: "Instructed by that which we ourselves feel, let us not consider the text as something which we have only heard, but rather like something which we have experienced and which we touch with our hands; not like a strange and unheard of story, but rather like something that we bring out to light from the deepest part of our heart, as if these were sentiments which form part of our being. Let us repeat them; it is not the reading (the study) what makes us penetrate into the sense or meaning of the words, but rather our own experience which has previously been acquired in the life of every day." (*Collationes* X, 11). Life enlightens the text; the text enlightens life. If, at times, the text says nothing, it is not because of lack of study or because of lack of prayer, but simply because of lack of depth in one's own life.
- John 5: 31-32: The value of the witness of Jesus. The witness of Jesus is true because He does not promote or exalt Himself. "There is another witness who speaks on My behalf," that is, the Father. And His witness is true and deserves to be believed.
- John 5: 33-36: The value of the witness of John the Baptist and of the works of Jesus. John the Baptist also gave witness to Jesus and presents Him to the people as the One sent by God who has to come to this world (cf. Jn 1: 29, 33-34; 3: 28-34). For this reason, even if the witness of John the Baptist is very important, Jesus does not depend on him. He has a witness in His favor who is greater than the witness of John, that is, the works which the Father carries out through Him (Jn 14: 10-11).
- John 5: 37-38: The Father bears witness to Jesus. Previously, Jesus had said, "Whoever is from God listens to the words of God" (Jn 8: 47). The Jews who accused Jesus did not have a mind open to God. And for this reason, they do not perceive the witness of the Father which reaches them through Jesus.
- John 5: 39-41: Scripture itself gives testimony of Jesus. The Jews say that they have faith in the Scriptures, but, in reality, they do not understand Scripture, because the Scripture speaks of Jesus (cf. Jn 5: 46; 12: 16, 41; 20: 9).
- John 5: 42-47: The Father does not judge but entrusts His judgment to the Son. The Jews say that they are faithful to the Scripture of Moses and, because of this, they condemn Jesus. In reality, Moses and the Scripture speak about Jesus and ask us to believe in Him.

Personal Questions

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

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

Concluding Prayer

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

Friday, March 19, 2021

Matthew 1: 16, 18-21, 24a

Joseph, the Spouse of Mary, the Mother of Jesus

Season of Lent

LECTIO

Opening Prayer

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

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

Spirit of God, the sap of love of the immense tree on which you graft us, so that all our brothers will seem to us as a gift in the great Body in which the Word of communion matures. (*Frère Pierre-Yves of Taizé*)

Reading of the Gospel: Matthew 1: 16-24

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

'God-is-with-us.' When Joseph woke up he did what the angel of the Lord had told him to do: he took his wife to his home; he had not had intercourse with her when she gave birth to a son; and he named him Jesus.

A Moment of Silence:

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

MEDITATIO

- A Key to the Reading:

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

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

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

Jesus is born from "Mary who was betrothed to Joseph" (Mt 1: 18a)) who "was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit" (Mt 1: 18b). Matthew does not give the

account of the annunciation as Luke does (Lk 1, 26-38), but structures the account from the point of view of the experience of Joseph the just man. The Bible reveals to us that God loves the just and many times chooses them for an important mission, protects them and does not join them to the impious (Gen 18: 23ff). In the Old Testament we find many persons who are considered just. We think of Noah “a good man, an upright man among his contemporaries” (Gen 6: 9). Or also Joash who “did what Yahweh regards as right” (2 Kgs 12: 3).

A constant idea in the Bible is the “dream” as a privileged place where God makes his projects and designs known, and sometimes reveals the future. The dreams of Jacob and Betel are well known (Gen 28: 10ff) and Joseph his son, as also those of the cup bearer and the chief baker imprisoned in Egypt with him (Gen 37: 5ff; Gen 40: 5ff) and the dreams of Pharaoh which revealed the future years of plenty and of famine and want (Gen 41: 1ff).

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

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

ORATIO

Psalm 92

It is good to give thanks to Yahweh, to make music for your name, Most High, to proclaim your faithful love at daybreak, and your constancy all through the night, on the lyre, the ten-stringed lyre, to the murmur of the harp.

You have brought me joy, Yahweh, by your deeds, at the work of your hands I cry out, 'How great are your works, Yahweh, immensely deep your thoughts!' Stupid people cannot realize this, fools do not grasp it.

The wicked may sprout like weeds, and every evil-doer flourish, but only to be eternally destroyed; whereas you are supreme forever, Yahweh. Look how your enemies perish, how all evil doers are scattered!

You give me the strength of the wild ox, you anoint me with fresh oil; I caught sight of the ambush against me, overheard the plans of the wicked.

The upright will flourish like the palm tree, will grow like a cedar of Lebanon.

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

Moments for a prayerful silence

CONTEMPLATIO

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

Saturday, March 20, 2021

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Almighty God, when people encountered your Son, he became a source of division: he affected their lives one way or another. May we accept him fully and empty ourselves to make room for him in our everyday life, even when it hurts.

Help us, that with him we may always seek and do your will. We ask you this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 7: 40-53

Some of the crowd who had been listening Jesus said, 'He is indeed the prophet,' and some said, 'He is the Christ,' but others said, 'Would the Christ come from Galilee? Does not scripture say that the Christ must be descended from David and come from Bethlehem, the village where David was?' So, the people could not agree about him.

Some wanted to arrest him, but no one actually laid a hand on him. The guards went back to the chief priests and Pharisees who said to them, 'Why haven't you brought him?' The guards replied, 'No one has ever spoken like this man.' 'So,' the Pharisees answered, 'you, too, have been led astray? Have any of the authorities come to believe in him? Any of the Pharisees? This rabble knows nothing about the Law -- they are damned.'

One of them, Nicodemus -- the same man who had come to Jesus earlier -- said to them, 'But surely our Law does not allow us to pass judgement on anyone without first giving him a hearing and discovering what he is doing?' To this they answered, 'Are you a Galilean too? Go into the matter, and see for yourself: prophets do not arise in Galilee.'

They all went home.

Reflection

- In chapter 7, John confirms that there were diverse opinions and much confusion among the people regarding Jesus. The relatives thought something (Jn 7: 2-5), people thought something different (Jn 7: 12). Some said: "He is a prophet!" (Jn 7: 40). Others said: "He leads the people astray!" (Jn 7: 12). Some praised him: "He is a good man!" (Jn 7: 12). Others criticized him: "He has not been educated, has not studied!" (Jn 7: 15). Many opinions. Each one had his own arguments, taken from the Bible or from Tradition. But nobody remembered the Messiah Servant, announced by Isaiah (Is 42: 1-9; 49: 1-6; 50: 4-9; 52: 13-53: 12; 61: 1-2). Today, also, there is much discussion on religion, and all take their arguments from the Bible. As in the past, the same thing today, it happens many times that little ones are deceived by the discourses of the great ones and, sometimes, even by the discourses of those who belong to the Church.
- John 7: 40-44: The confusion among the people. The reaction of the people is very diverse. Some say: he is the prophet. Others: he is the Messiah; the Christ. Others claim: He cannot be because the Messiah will come from Bethlehem and he comes from Galilee! These diverse ideas on the Messiah produce division and confrontation. There were some who wanted to take him, to arrest him, but they did not do it. Perhaps because they were afraid of the people (cf. Mt 14: 2).
- John 7: 45-49: The arguments of the authority. Previously, before the reaction of the people who were in favor of Jesus, the Pharisees had sent some guards to arrest him (Jn 7: 32). But the guards returned without Jesus. They had been greatly impressed in hearing people speak so well: "No one has ever spoken like this man!" The Pharisees reacted: "Have you also been led astray?" According to the Pharisees who said: "This rabble knows nothing about the Law" and allows itself to be deceived by Jesus. It is as if they said: "No, we the chief priests know things better and we do not allow ourselves to be led astray!" and they say that the people are "damned"! The religious authority of that time treated people with great contempt.
- John 7: 50-52: The defense of Jesus by Nicodemus. Before this stupid argument, the honesty of Nicodemus revolts and he raises his voice to defend Jesus: "But surely our Law does not allow us to pass judgment on anyone without first giving him a hearing and discovering what he is doing?" The reaction of the others is that Nicodemus is mocking them: "Nicodemus are you also from Galilee? Look at the Bible and you will see for yourself that prophets do not arise in Galilee!" They are sure! Holding the book of the past, they defend themselves against the future which arrives and disturbs them. Today, many people continue to do the same thing. They only accept the novelty if it agrees with their own ideas which belong to the past.

Personal Questions

- Today, which are the diverse opinions that people have about Jesus? And in your community, are there different opinions which cause confusion? Which? Say them, describe them.
- There are persons who accept only the novelty which agrees with their own ideas and which belongs to the past. And you?

Concluding Prayer

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

Sunday, March 21, 2021

*Fifth Sunday of Lent
We wish to see Jesus
John 12: 20-33*

Opening Prayer

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

Reading

- The Context:

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

This passage may not be entirely real. It wishes to point out that the opening to the peoples began with Jesus himself. It is not a question of going to others to convince them of something, but above all of welcoming their seeking and bringing it to maturity. This kind of maturity does not happen by itself but requires the collaboration of others and dialogue with Jesus. John does not tell us whether Jesus spoke to the Greeks. The text seems to abbreviate the story when it immediately

points to the "kind of Jesus" those who seek him must go. It is the Jesus who gives his life, who bears fruit through his death. Not, therefore, a "philosopher" or "wise" Jesus, but above all one who is not attached to his own life and who gave his life and placed himself at the service of everyone else's life.

Verses 27-33, which show the anguished and troubled soul of Jesus when faced with his imminent death, are also called "the Gethsemani of the fourth Gospel", in parallel with the Synoptic Gospels concerning the painful vigil of Jesus in Gethsemani. That which happens to a grain of wheat, that is, only when it breaks and dies can it free all its vitality, is also true of Jesus who in dying will show all his love by giving his life. The story of the grain of wheat is the story of Jesus and of every disciple who wishes to serve him and have life in him.

- The Text:

²⁰ Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. ²¹ So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." ²² Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew went with Philip and they told Jesus. ²³ And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified. ²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also; if any one serves me, the Father will honor him.

²⁷ "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify thy name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." ²⁹ The crowd standing by heard it and said that it had thundered. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." ³⁰ Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹ Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; ³² and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." ³³ He said this to show by what death he was to die.

A Moment of Silent Prayer

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

Some Questions

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

- Why is it that precisely Philip and Andrew were the ones approached?
- What were the "Greeks" really seeking?
- Have we sometimes been asked similar questions concerning faith, the Church, Christian life?

- Jesus does not seem to have met the "Greeks" but he made reference to his coming "hour". Why?
- Did Jesus expect them to answer in set forms? Or through their witness?

A Deepening of the Reading

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

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

But the context within which John places this request shows that they really sought Jesus with all their heart. Especially since they come immediately after it is written: "The whole world followed him" (Jn 12: 19). Then Jesus comments on the statement with "the coming of the hour of the Son of man". The fact that they went to Philip, and Philip then went to Andrew, is due to the fact that both of them came from Bethsaida, a city where people came from mixed background and one needed to understand several languages. These two represent two sensibilities: Philip is more traditional (as we can see from his words when he meets Jesus (Jn 1: 45); while Andrew had already participated in John's movement and was more open to new things (cfr Jn 1: 41). This is to show that the community that opens itself to pagans, that welcomes the request of those who seek with a curious heart, is welcomed by a community that lives in a variety of sensibilities.

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

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

This is true for them, but it is also true for every Christian community that wishes to open itself to "Greeks". Such a community must "consult" with the Lord, that is, it must keep in contact with this facet, this death for life, must give its own contemplation of the mystery and not just provide ideas. It must live in full detachment from security and human gratification, so that it may serve the Lord and, it too, receive honor from the Father. Attachment to one's life and to worldly wisdom – and in the Greek world these were important values – is the great obstacle to a true "knowledge of Jesus". To serve the name of the Lord, welcome the request

of those who "seek him", bring these seekers to Jesus, without living according to the Lord, without above all giving witness to sharing one's choice of life, one's gift of life, is useless.

- **"How is my soul troubled"**

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

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

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

Seen apart from the homicidal violence of one who felt threatened, the hanging on the cross becomes a real *elevation*, that is, the exhibiting of one who is salvation and blessing for all. From the violence that wanted to marginalize and eliminate, we move to the centripetal force exercised by that icon of the *elevated*. This is an "attraction" generated by curiosity, but which through love will become the source of discipleship, of allegiance in all those who can go beyond the physical event and see in him total free gift of self.

It will no longer be seen as the ignominious death that creates distance, but the source of a mysterious attraction, a way that gives new meanings to life. A life given that generates life; a life killed that generates hope and new solidarity, new communion, new freedom.

Psalm 125

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then they said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them." The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb!

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy! He that goes forth weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.

Closing Prayer

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

Monday, March 22, 2021

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Just and merciful God,

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

Gospel Reading - John 8: 1-11

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

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

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

Reflection

- In today's Gospel, we will meditate on the encounter of Jesus with the woman whom was going to be stoned. Because of his preaching and his way of acting Jesus disturbs and troubles the religious authority. Because of this, they tried, by all possible means, to accuse him and to get rid of him. Thus, they bring before him a woman, caught committing adultery. Under the appearance of fidelity to the Law, they use the woman in order to have an argument against Jesus. Today also, under the appearance of fidelity to the Laws of the Church, many persons are marginalized. Divorcés/divorcées, prostitutes, sick with AIDS, single mothers, homosexuals, etc. Let us see how Jesus reacts:
- John 8: 1-2: Jesus and the people. After the discussion on the origin of the Messiah, described at the end of chapter 7 (Jn 7: 37-52), "They all went home" (Jn 7: 53). Jesus did not have a house in Jerusalem. This is the reason why he went to the Mount of Olives. There was a garden there, where he usually spent the night in prayer (Jn 18: 1). The following day, before dawn, before the rising of the sun, Jesus was again in the Temple. People came very close to him to be able to listen to him. They sat on the ground, around Jesus and he taught them. What did Jesus teach? It must have been very beautiful because people went there before sun rise in order to listen to him!
- John 8: 3-6a: The Scribes prepare the ambush. Unexpectedly, the Scribes and Pharisees arrive, with a woman caught committing adultery. They make her stand in the middle. According to the law, the woman would have to be stoned (Lv 20: 20; Dt 22: 22, 24). They ask: "What is your opinion, what do you got to say?" It was a trap. If Jesus would have said: "Apply the Law", they would have said: "He is not as good as he seems, because he has said to kill the poor woman!" If he had said: "Do not kill her," they would have said: "He is not as good as he seems, because he does not even observe the law!" Under appearances of fidelity to God, they manipulate the law using the person of the woman in order to be able to accuse Jesus.
- John 8: 6b-8: Reaction of Jesus: he writes on the ground. It seemed to be a dead alley without an outing. But Jesus is not frightened, nor does he get nervous. Rather, all the contrary. Calmly, as dominating the situation, he bends down and begins to write on the ground with his finger. His enemies are those who get nervous. They insist and they want Jesus to give his opinion. Then Jesus rises and says: "Let the one among you who is guiltless be the first to throw a stone at her!" Then bending down again he continued to write on the ground. Jesus does not discuss the law. But he changes the objective of the judgment. Instead of allowing them to place the law above the woman to condemn her, he asks them to examine themselves in the light of what the law demands from them. The symbolical action of writing on the ground clarifies everything. The word of the Law of God has its own consistency. A word written on the ground has no consistency. The rain and the wind carry it away. The forgiveness of God takes away sin identified and denounced by the law.
- John 8: 9-11: Jesus and the woman. The gesture and response of Jesus make his enemies go away, they are conquered. The Pharisees and the Scribes go away full of

shame, one after the other, beginning with the eldest. The contrary of what they expected takes place. The person condemned by the law was not the woman, but rather they who believed to be faithful to the law. At the end, Jesus remains alone with the woman who stood in the middle. Jesus straightened up and said: "Woman, where are they who condemned you? Has no one condemned you?!" She replied: "No one, Sir!" And Jesus: "Neither do I condemn you! Go away, and from this moment sin no more!"

- Jesus does not allow anyone to use the Law of God to condemn the brother or the sister when the person who condemns is himself/herself a sinner. This episode, better than any other teaching, reveals that Jesus is the light which makes truth shine. He opens up what exists in the secret of persons, in the intimate depth of each one of us. In the light of his word, those who seemed to be the defenders of the law reveal themselves being full of sin and they themselves recognize it, and they leave, beginning by the eldest. And the woman considered to be guilty and deserving of death, remains standing up before God, absolved, redeemed and with her dignity recovered (cf. Jn 3: 19-21).

Personal Questions

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

Concluding Prayer

Yahweh is my shepherd, I lack nothing. In grassy meadows he lets me lie.
By tranquil streams he leads me to restore my spirit.
He guides me in paths of saving justice as befits his name. (Ps 51: 1-3)

Tuesday, March 23, 2021

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

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

Gospel Reading - John 8: 21-30

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

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

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

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

Reflection

- Last week, the Liturgy led us to meditate on chapter five of the Gospel of John. This week it confronts us with chapter 8 of the same Gospel. Like chapter 5, chapter 8 also contains profound reflections on the mystery of God which surrounds the person of Jesus. Apparently, it is a question of dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisees (Jn 8: 13). The Pharisees want to know who Jesus is. They criticize him because he gives testimony of himself without any proof or witness to legitimize himself before the people (Jn 8: 13). Jesus responds by saying that he does not speak in his own name, but always for the Father and in the name of the Father (Jn 8: 14-19).
- In reality, the dialogues are also an expression of how the faith was transmitted in the catechesis in the communities of the beloved disciple toward the end of the first century. They show the prayerful reading of the word of Jesus that the Christians did, considering it Word of God. The method of question and answer helped to find the response to the problems which toward the end of the first century, the Jews raised to the Christians. It was a concrete way to help the community to deepen its faith in Jesus and in his message.
- John 8: 21-22: Where I am going, you cannot come. Here John presents a new theme or another aspect which surrounds the person of Jesus. Jesus speaks about his departure and says that where he is going the Pharisees cannot follow him. "I am going away; you will look for me and you will die in your sin." They will look for Jesus, but will not find him, because they do not know him and will look for him with mistaken criteria. They live in sin and will die in sin. To live in sin is to live far away from God. They imagine God in a certain way, but God is different from what they imagine. This is why they are not capable to recognize the presence of God in Jesus.

The Pharisees do not understand what Jesus wants to say and they take everything just literally: "Is he going to kill himself?"

- John 8: 23-24: You are from here below; I am from above. The Pharisees consider everything according to the criteria of this world. "You are from this world; I am not from this world!" The framework of reference which guides Jesus in everything which he says and does is the world above, that is, God, Father, and the mission which he has received from the Father. The framework of reference of the Pharisees is the world below, without openness, closed up in its own criteria. This is why they live in sin. To live in sin is not to have the gaze of Jesus on their life. The look of Jesus is totally open toward God up to the point that God himself is in him in all his fullness (cf. Col 1: 19). We say: "Jesus is God". John invites us to say: "God is Jesus!" This is why Jesus says: "If you do not believe that I AM HE, you will die in your sins". I AM is the affirmation with which God presents himself to Moses at the moment of liberating his people from the oppression of Egypt (Ex 3: 13-14). This is the maximum expression of the absolute certainty of the fact that God is in our midst in the person of Jesus. Jesus is the definitive proof of the fact that God is with us. Emmanuel.
- John 8: 25-26: Who are you? The mystery of God in Jesus does not fit in the criteria with which the Pharisees look toward Jesus. Once again they ask: "who are you?" They did not understand because they do not understand Jesus' language. Jesus was very careful to speak to them according to all that he experienced and lived in union with the Father and for the knowledge and awareness of his mission. Jesus does not promote himself. He only says and expresses what he hears from the Father. He is the pure revelation because he is pure and total obedience.
- John 8: 27-30: When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will know that I AM HE. The Pharisees did not understand that Jesus, in everything he says and does, is the expression of the Father. They will understand it only after the Son of man will be lifted up. "Then you will know that I AM HE". The word lifted up has a double sense, to be lifted up on the Cross and to be lifted up to the right hand of the Father. The Good News of the death and resurrection reveals who Jesus is, and they will know that Jesus is the presence of God in our midst. The foundation of this certainty of our faith is twofold: on the one side, the certainty that the Father is always with Jesus and he never remains alone and, on the other side, the radical and total obedience of Jesus to the Father, which becomes total openness and total transparency of the Father for us.

Personal questions

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

Concluding Prayer

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

Wednesday, March 24, 2021

John 8: 31-42
Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord our God, You call us to be free people. Help us to give You always a response of freedom.

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

Gospel Reading - John 8: 31-42

Jesus said to those Jews who believed in him, "If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How can you say, 'You will become free'?" Jesus answered them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin. A slave does not remain in a household forever, but a son always remains. So if the Son frees you, then you will truly be free. I know that you are descendants of Abraham. But you are trying to kill me, because my word has no room among you. I tell you what I have seen in the Father's presence; then do what you have heard from the Father." They answered and said to him, "Our father is Abraham." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works of Abraham. But now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God; Abraham did not do this. You are doing the works of your father!" So they said to him, "We were not born of fornication. We have one Father, God." Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and am here; I did not come on my own, but he sent me."

Reflection

- The reflection on chapter 8 of the Gospel of John continues today. In the form of concentric circles, John deepens the mystery of God which envelopes the person of Jesus. It seems like a repetition, because he always goes back to speak of the same point. In reality, it is the same point, but every time at a more profound level. Today's Gospel treats the theme of the relationship of Jesus with Abraham, the Father of the People of God. John tries to help the communities understand how Jesus places

himself within the whole history of the People of God. He helps them to perceive the difference that existed between Jesus and the Jews, and also the Jews and the others, as all of us are sons and daughters of Abraham.

- John 8: 31-32: The liberty which comes from fidelity to the word of Jesus. Jesus affirms to the Jews: “If you make My word your home you will indeed be My disciples; 32 you will come to know the truth and the truth will set you free”. To be a disciple of Jesus is the same as opening oneself to God. The words of Jesus are in reality words of God. They communicate the truth, because they make things known as they are in the eyes of God and not in the eyes of the Pharisees. Later, during the Last Supper, Jesus will teach the same thing to the disciples.
- John 8: 33, 38: What is it to be a son or a daughter of Abraham? The reaction of the Jews is immediate: “We are descended from Abraham and we have never been the slaves of anyone: what do You mean: You will be set free?” Jesus repeats and confirms making a distinction between son and slave and says: “Everyone who commits sin is a slave. The slave has no permanent standing in the household, but a son belongs to it forever. So, if the Son sets you free, you will indeed be free”. Jesus is the son and remains in the house of the Father. The slave does not live in the house of the Father. To live outside the house, outside of God means to live in sin. If they would accept the word of Jesus, they could become sons and attain liberty. They would no longer be slaves. And Jesus continues: “I know that you are descended from Abraham; but you want to kill Me, because My word finds no place in you.” The distinction is immediately very clear: “What I speak of is what I have seen at My Father’s side, and you too put into action the lessons you have learnt from your father.” Jesus denies to them the right to say that they are sons of Abraham, because their works affirm the contrary.
- John 8: 39-41a: A son of Abraham fulfills the works of Abraham. They insist in affirming: “Our father is Abraham!” as if they wanted to present to Jesus a document of their identity. Jesus repeats: “If you are sons of Abraham do the works of Abraham! Now, instead you are seeking to kill Me, because I have told you the truth heard from God; Abraham has not done this. ⁴¹ You do the works of your father”. Between the lines, He suggests that their father is Satan (Jn 8: 44). He suggests that they are sons of prostitution.
- John 8: 41b-42: If God was your Father, certainly, you would love Me, because I have My origin in God and I come from Him; I did not come of My own accord, but He sent Me”. Jesus repeats the same truth using diverse words: “Whoever comes from God listens to the words of God”. The origin of this affirmation is from Jeremiah who says: “Within them I shall plant My Law, writing it on their hearts. Then I shall be their God and they will be My people. There will be no further need for everyone to teach neighbor or brother, saying: ‘Learn to know Yahweh!’ No, they will all know Me, from the least to the greatest, Yahweh declares, since I shall forgive their guilt and never more call their sin to mind” (Jr 31: 33-34). But they will not open themselves to this new experience of God, and because of this they will not recognize Jesus as the one sent by the Father.

Personal Questions

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

Concluding Prayer

May You be blessed, Lord, God of our ancestors, be praised and extolled forever. Blessed be Your glorious and holy name, praised and extolled forever. Blessed on the throne of Your kingdom, exalted above all, glorified forever. (Dn 3: 52, 54)

Thursday, March 25, 2021

God's covenant with humanity Mary's yes and our yes
Luke 1,26-38

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

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

Reading

- The Context of the Passage:

The story of the annunciation takes us from the temple, a holy place par excellence, to the house, to the intimacy of a personal meeting of God with his creature; it leads us into ourselves, into the deepest part of our being and our story, where God alone can reach and touch us. The announcement of the birth of John the Baptist had opened the sterile womb of Elisabeth, thus overcoming the absolute powerlessness of humankind and transforming it into the ability to

collaborate with God. On the other hand, the announcement of the birth of Jesus, knocks on the door of a fertile womb of the one who is “full of grace” and awaits a reply: it is God who waits for our yes so as to work everything in us.

- An Aid to the Reading of this Passage:

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

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

- o vv. 28-29: These are the very first words of the dialogue between God and his creature. Just a few words, a mere breath, but all-powerful words that disturb the heart, that question deeply the meaning of human life, plans and expectations. The angel announces joy, grace and the presence of God; Mary is disturbed and asks herself how can any of this be happening to her. Where can such a joy come from? How can such a great grace, that can change her very being, be hers?
- o vv. 30-33: These are the central verses of the excerpt: it is the explosion of the announcement, the manifestation of the gift of God, of his omnipotence in the life of human beings. Gabriel, the strong, speaks of Jesus: the eternal king, the Savior, the God made child, the humble all-powerful. He speaks of Mary, of her womb, of her life that she was chosen to be the gateway to welcoming God in this world and into the lives of all people. Even at this stage of the events, God begins to draw near, to knock. He stands, attentive, by the door of the heart of Mary; and even now by our house, our hearts.
- o v. 34: Mary, faced by God’s proposal, allows herself to stand naked, she allows herself to be read to her very depths. She speaks of herself, her heart, her wishes. She knows that for God the impossible is possible, she does not doubt or harden her heart and mind, she does not count the cost; she only wants to be fully available, open, and allows herself to be reached by that humanly impossible touch, but one already written, already realized in God. In a gesture of utter poverty, she places before God her virginity, her not knowing man. This is a complete and absolute surrender of self, full of faith and trust. It is her preliminary yes.
- o vv. 35-37: God, most humble, gives an answer; the all-powerful bends over the fragility of this woman, who represents each one of us. The dialogue continues, the covenant grows and is strengthened. God reveals the how, he speaks of the Holy Spirit, of the fruitful overshadowing, which does no violence, does not break, but preserves intact. He speaks of the human experience of Elizabeth,

he reveals another impossible thing made possible; almost like a guarantee or security. And then comes the last word when one must make a choice: to say yes or no, believe or doubt, dissolve or harden oneself, to open the door or close it. "Nothing is impossible for God".

- o v. 38: The last verse seems to contain an infinity. Mary says her "Here I am", she opens herself wide to God and then the meeting, the union takes place forever. God enters into the human and the human becomes the place of God: these are the most sublime Nuptials possible on earth. And yet, the Gospel ends on a sad and hard note: Mary stays alone, the angel leaves. What remains, however, is the yes pronounced to God and God's presence; what remains is real Life.

- The Text:

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

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

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

A few questions

- God's announcement, his angel, enters my life, stands before me and speaks to me. Am I prepared to welcome him, to give him space, to listen to him attentively?
- Suddenly I receive an upsetting announcement; God speaks to me of joy, grace and presence. All the things that I have been seeking for so long, always. Who can make me really happy? Am I willing to trust in his happiness and his presence?
- Not much is needed, just a movement of the heart, of my being; He is already aware of this. He is already overwhelming me with light and love. He says to me: "You have

found favour in my sight". So, I please God? He finds me pleasant, loveable? Yes, that is how it really is. Why is it that I would not believe it before? Why have I not listened to him?

- The Lord Jesus wants to come into this world also through me; he wants to reach my brothers and sisters through the paths of my life, of my being. Would I lead him astray? Would I refuse him, keep him at a distance? Would I wipe him out of my story, my life?

A Key to the Reading

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

- **Rejoice!**

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

- **The Lord is with you**

These simple and enlightened words pronounced by the angel to Mary, liberate an all-powerful force; I realize that these words alone would suffice to save my life, to lift me up again from whatever fall or humiliation, to bring me back when I go astray. The fact that He, my Lord, is with me, keeps me alive, gives me courage and trust to go on being. If I am, it is because He is with me. Who knows but that the experience of Isaac told in Scripture might not be valid for me, the most beautiful thing imaginable that could happen to a person who believes in and loves God, when one day Abimelech came to Isaac with his men to tell him: "It became clear to us that Yahweh was with you" (Gen 26: 28) and then asked to become friends and form an alliance. Would that the same thing might be said of me; would that I could show that the Lord is truly with me, in my life, in my desires, in my affections, in my choices and actions; would that others might meet Him through me. Perhaps for this, it is necessary for me to absorb more the presence of God, for me to eat and drink of Him.

Let me go to the school of Scripture, to read and re-read some passages where the voice of the Lord tells me again and again of this truth and, while He speaks, to be transformed, ever more in- dwelt. “Remain for the present in that country; I shall be with you and bless you” (Gen 26: 3). “To Joshua son of Nun, Yahweh gave this order: Be strong and stand firm, for you are to be the one to bring the Israelites into the country which I have promised them on oath, and I myself shall be with you” (Dt 31: 23). “They will fight against you but will not overcome you, because I am with you to save you and rescue you” (Jer 15: 20). “The angel of Yahweh appeared to him and said: Yahweh is with you, valiant warrior!” (Judges 6: 12). “Yahweh appeared to him the same night and said: I am the God of your father Abraham. Do not be afraid, for I am with you. I shall bless you and multiply your offspring for my servant Abraham’s sake” (Gen 26: 24). “Be sure, I am with you; I shall keep you safe wherever you go, and bring you back to this country, for I shall never desert you until I have done what I have promised you” (Gen 28: 15). “Do not be afraid, for I am with you; do not be alarmed, for I am your God. I give you strength, truly I help you, truly I hold you firm with my saving right hand” (Is 41: 10)

- **Do not be afraid**

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

- **You enjoy God’s favor**

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

that we always sought and much more. We have received freely, we are overwhelmed and now we can overflow.

- **Nothing is impossible for God**

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

- **Here I am**

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

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

A Time of Prayer: Psalm 138

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

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

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

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

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

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

If I count them, they are more than the grains of sand; if I come to an end, I am still with you. God, examine me and know my heart, test me and know my concerns.

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

Closing Prayer

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

Friday, March 26, 2021

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,

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

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

Gospel Reading - John 10: 31-42

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

The Jews answered him, 'We are stoning you, not for doing a good work, but for blasphemy; though you are only a man, you claim to be God.' Jesus answered: Is it not written in your Law: I said, you are gods? So, it uses the word 'gods' of those people to whom the word of God was addressed -- and scripture cannot be set aside. Yet to

someone whom the Father has consecrated and sent into the world you say, 'You are blaspheming' because I said, 'I am Son of God.' If I am not doing my Father's work, there is no need to believe me; but if I am doing it, then even if you refuse to believe in me, at least believe in the work I do; then you will know for certain that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.

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

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

Reflection

- We are close to Holy Week, during which we commemorate and update the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus. Beginning with the fourth week of Lent, the texts of the Gospel of every day are texts taken almost exclusively from the Gospel of John, two chapters which stress the dramatic tension between the progressive revelation, on the one side, which Jesus makes of the mystery of the Father which fills him completely, and on the other side, the progressive closing up of the Jews who always become more impenetrable to the message of Jesus. The tragic aspect of this closing up is that they claim it is in fidelity to God. They refuse Jesus in the name of God.
- This way in which John presents the conflict between Jesus and the religious authority is not only something which has taken place in the far past. It is also a mirror which reflects what happens today. In the name of God, some persons transform themselves into bombs and kill other persons. In the name of God, we, members of the three religions of the God of Abraham, Jews, Christians and Muslims, mutually condemn one another, fight among ourselves, throughout history. Ecumenism is difficult among us, and at the same time it is necessary. In the name of God, many horrible things have been committed and we continue to commit them every day. Lent is an important period of time to stop and to ask ourselves: Which is the image of God which I have within me?
- John 10: 31-33: The Jews want to stone Jesus. The Jews prepare stone to kill Jesus and Jesus asks: "I have shown you many good works from my Father, for which of these are you stoning me?" The answer: "We are stoning you, not for doing a good work, but for blasphemy; though you are only man, you claim to be God". They want to kill Jesus because he blasphemes. The law ordered that such persons should be stoned.
- John 10: 34-36: The Bible calls all sons of God. They want to kill Jesus because he says he is God. Jesus responds in the name of the law of God itself. "Is it not perhaps written in your Law: I said you are gods? Now, if the Law has called gods those to whom the Word of God was addressed (and Scripture cannot be set aside), to those whom the Father has consecrated and sent into the world, and you say: You blaspheme, because I have said: I am the Son of God?"

- Strangely, Jesus says “your law”. He could have said: “our Law.” Why does he speak in this way? Here appears again the tragic division between Jews and Christians, brothers, sons of the same father Abraham, who became irreconcilable enemies to the point that the Christians say “your law,” as if it were not our law.
- John 10: 37-38: At least believe in the works. Jesus again speaks of the works that he does and which are the revelation of the Father. If I do not do the works of the Father, there is no need to believe in me. But if I do them, even if you do not believe in me, at least believe in the works I do, so that you will believe that the Father is in me and I am in the Father. These are the same words that he said at the Last Supper (Jn 14: 10-11).
- John 10: 39-42: Once again they want to kill him, but he flees from their clutches. There was no sign of conversion. They continue to say that Jesus blasphemes and insist on killing him. There is no future for Jesus. His death has been decided, but as yet his hour has not arrived. Jesus goes out and crosses the Jordan going toward the place where John had baptized. In this way he indicates the continuity of his mission with the mission of John. He helped people to become aware of how God acts in history. The people recognize in Jesus the one whom John had announced.

Personal Questions

- The Jews condemn Jesus in the name of God, in the name of the image that they have of God. Sometimes, have I condemned someone in the name of God and then I have discovered that I was mistaken?
- Jesus calls himself “Son of God.” When in the Creed I say that Jesus is the Son of God, which is the content that I give to my profession of faith?

Concluding Prayer

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

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

Saturday, March 27, 2021

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord God, creator and Father of all, your sons and daughters are still scattered and divided: Christians and non-Christians, various Churches and sects claiming exclusive rights on your Son, and each of them full of factions.

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

Lord forever.

Gospel Reading – John 11: 45-57

Many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what he did, believed in him, but some of them went to the Pharisees to tell them what Jesus had done.

Then the chief priests and Pharisees called a meeting. 'Here is this man working all these signs,' they said, 'and what action are we taking? If we let him go on in this way everybody will believe in him, and the Romans will come and suppress the Holy Place and our nation.'

One of them, Caiaphas, the high priest that year, said, 'You do not seem to have grasped the situation at all; you fail to see that it is to your advantage that one man should die for the people, rather than that the whole nation should perish.' He did not speak in his own person, but as high priest of that year he was prophesying that Jesus was to die for the nation and not for the nation only, but also to gather together into one the scattered children of God.

From that day onwards they were determined to kill him. So Jesus no longer went about openly among the Jews, but left the district for a town called Ephraim, in the country bordering on the desert, and stayed there with his disciples. The Jewish Passover was drawing near, and many of the country people who had gone up to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves were looking out for Jesus, saying to one another as they stood about in the Temple, 'What do you think? Will he come to the festival or not?'

Reflection

- The Gospel today gives the last part of the long episode of the resurrection of Lazarus in Bethany, in the house of Martha and Mary (Jn 11: 1-56). The resurrection of Lazarus is the seventh sign (miracle) of Jesus in John's Gospel and is also the high and decisive point of the revelation which he made of God and of himself.
- The small community of Bethany, where Jesus liked to go, mirrors the situation and the life-style of the small community of the Beloved Disciple at the end of the first century in Asia Minor. Bethany means "The House of the poor." They were poor communities, poor people, Martha means "Lady" (coordinator): a woman coordinated the community. Lazarus means "God helps": the community which was poor expected everything from God. Mary means "loved by Yahweh: she was the beloved disciple, image of the community. The episode of the resurrection of Lazarus communicated this certainty: Jesus is the source of life for the community of the poor. Jesus is the source of life for all those who believe in Him.
- John 11: 45-46: The repercussion of the Seventh Sign among the people. After the resurrection of Lazarus (Jn 11: 1-44), there is the description of the repercussion of this sign among the people. The people were divided; "many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what he did, believed in him." But some of them went to the Pharisees to tell them what Jesus had done.

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

- John 11: 47-53: The repercussion of the Seventh Sign among those in authority. The news of the resurrection of Lazarus increased the popularity of Jesus. This is why the religious leaders convoked a council meeting, the Synedrium, the maximum authority, to discern getting rid of him; because “this man works many signs. If we let him go on this way everybody will believe in him and the Romans will come and suppress the Holy Place and our nation”. They were afraid of the Romans. And this because in the past it had been shown many times by the Roman invasions in the year 64 before Christ until the time of Jesus, that the Romans repressed with great violence any attempt of popular rebellion. (Cf. Ac 5: 35-37). In the case of Jesus, the Roman reaction could have led to the loss of everything, even of the Temple and of the privileged position of the priests. Because of this, Caiaphas, the High Priest, decides: “It is better that one man should die for the people, rather than that the whole nation should perish”. And the Evangelist comments: “He did not speak this in his own person, but as high priest of that year, he was prophesying that Jesus was to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather together into one the scattered children of God”. Thus, beginning at that moment, the chief priests concerned because Jesus’ authority was growing and motivated by the fear of the Romans, decided to kill Jesus.
- John 11: 54-56: The repercussion of the seventh sign in the life of Jesus. The final result is that Jesus had to live as a clandestine. “So, Jesus no longer went about openly among the Jews; he left the district and went to a region near the desert, to a city called Ephraim and stayed there with his disciples”. The Jewish Passover was drawing near. At this time of the year, the population of Jerusalem tripled because of the great number of pilgrims. The conversation was all around Jesus: “What do you think, will he come to the festival or not?” In the same way, at the time that the Gospel was written at the end of the first century, the time of the persecution of the Emperor Domitian (from 81 to 96), the Christian communities who lived in the service of others were obliged to live as clandestine.
- A key to understand the seventh sign of the resurrection of Lazarus. Lazarus was sick. His sisters Martha and Mary sent someone to call Jesus: “The one whom you love is sick!” (Jn 11: 3, 5). Jesus responds to the request and explains to the disciples: “This sickness will not end in death, but it is for God’s glory so that through it the Son of God may be glorified” (Jn 11: 4) In John’s Gospel, the glorification of Jesus comes through his death (Jn 12: 23; 17: 1). One of the causes of his condemnation to death was the resurrection of Lazarus (Jn 11: 50; 12: 10). Many Jews were in the house of Martha and Mary to console them because of the loss of their brother. The Jews, representatives of the Ancient Covenant, only know how to console. They do not give new life.... Jesus is the one who brings new life! Thus, on one side, the threat of death

against Jesus! On the other, Jesus who overcomes death! In this context of conflict between life and death the seventh sign of the resurrection of Lazarus takes place. Martha says that she believes in the resurrection. The Pharisees and the majority of the people say that they believe in the Resurrection (Ac 23: 6-10; Mk 12: 18). They believed, but they did not reveal it. It was only faith in the resurrection at the end of time and not in the present resurrection in history, here and now. This ancient faith did not renew life. It is not enough to believe in the resurrection which will come at the end of time, but it is necessary to believe in the Resurrection already present here and now in the person of Jesus and in those who believe in Jesus. On these people, death no longer has any power, because Jesus "is the resurrection and the life". Even without seeing the concrete sign of the resurrection of Lazarus, Martha confesses her faith: "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of the living God who was to come into the world" (Jn 11: 27).

- Jesus orders that the stone be removed. Martha reacts: "Lord, by now he will smell!" This is the fourth day since he died!" (Jn 11: 39). Once again Jesus presents the challenge asking to believe in the resurrection, here and now, as a sign of the glory of God: "Have I not told you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?" (Jn 11: 40). They removed the stone. Before the open tomb and before the unbelief of the persons, Jesus addresses himself to the Father. In his prayer, first of all, he gives thanks: "Father, I thank you for hearing my prayer. I myself knew that you hear me always!" (Jn 11: 41-42). Jesus knows the Father and trusts him. But now he asks for a sign because of the multitude which is around him, so that the people can believe that he, Jesus, has been sent by the Father. Then he cried out in a loud voice: "Lazarus, come out!" Lazarus came out (Jn 11: 43-44). This is the triumph of life over death, of faith over unbelief. A farmer commented: "It is up to us to remove the stone. And it is up to God to resurrect the community. There are people who do not know how to remove the stone, and because of this their community has no life!"

Personal Questions

- What does it mean concretely, for me to believe in the resurrection?
- Part of the people accepted Jesus, and part did not. Today part of the people accept the renewal of the Church and part do not. And you?

Concluding Prayer

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

Sunday, March 28, 2021

*The Passion and Death of Jesus according to Mark
The final defeat as a new call
Mark 14: 1 – 15: 47*

Palm Sunday

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.

A Reading of the Passion and Death of Jesus According to Mark

- **A Key to the Reading:**

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

Mark writes for the communities of the 70s. Many of these communities, whether in Italy or Syria, were going through their own passion. They were faced with the cross in many ways. They had been persecuted at the time of Nero in the 60's and many had died devoured by wild beasts. Others had betrayed, denied or abandoned their faith in Jesus, like Peter, Judas and other disciples. Others asked themselves: "Can I bear persecution?" Others were tired after persevering through many trials without any results. Among those who had abandoned their faith, some asked themselves whether it was possible to rejoin the community. They wanted to start their journey again, but did not know if it was possible to rejoin. A cut branch has no roots! They all needed new and strong reasons to restart their journey. They were in need of a renewed experience of the love of God, one that surpassed their human errors. Where could they find this?

For them, as for us, the answer is in chapters 14 to 16 of Mark's Gospel, which describe the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, the time of the greatest defeat of the

disciples and, in an hidden way, their greatest hope. Let us look into the mirror of these chapters to see how the disciples reacted to the Cross and how Jesus reacts to the infidelity and weaknesses of the disciples. Let us try to discover how Mark encourages the faith of the community and how he describes the one who is truly a disciple of Jesus.

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

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

¹ It was two days before the Passover and the feast of Unleavened Bread, and the chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by some trick and have him put to death. ² For they said, 'It must not be during the festivities, or there will be a disturbance among the people.' ³ He was at Bethany in the house of Simon, a man who had suffered from a virulent skin-disease; he was at table when a woman came in with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the ointment on his head. ⁴ Some who were there said to one another indignantly, 'Why this waste of ointment?' ⁵ Ointment like this could have been sold for over three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor'; and they were angry with her. ⁶ But Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. Why are you upsetting her? What she has done for me is a good work. ⁷ You have the poor with you always, and you can be kind to them whenever you wish, but you will not always have me. ⁸ She has done what she could: she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. ⁹ In truth I tell you, wherever throughout all the world the gospel is proclaimed, what she has done will be told as well, in remembrance of her.'

+ Mark 14: 1-2: The conspiracy against Jesus.

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

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

+ Mark 14: 3-9: A faithful disciple.

A woman, whose name is not mentioned, anoints Jesus with an expensive perfume (Mk 14: 3). The disciples criticise this gesture. They think it is a waste (Mk 14: 4-5). But Jesus defends her: "Why are you upsetting her? What she has done for me is a good work; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial" (Mk 14: 6, 8). In those days,

those who died crucified were neither buried nor could they be embalmed. Knowing this, the woman anticipates and anoints the body of Jesus before his sentence and crucifixion. This gesture shows that she accepts Jesus as the Messiah Servant who will die on the cross. Jesus understands the gesture of the woman and approves of it. Earlier, Peter had rejected the idea of a Crucified Messiah (Mk 8:32). This anonymous woman is the faithful disciple, model for his disciples who had understood nothing. This model is for all, "throughout all the world" (Mk 14: 9).

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

¹⁰ Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, approached the chief priests with an offer to hand Jesus over to them. ¹¹ They were delighted to hear it, and promised to give him money; and he began to look for a way of betraying him when the opportunity should occur. ¹² On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb was sacrificed, his disciples said to him, 'Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?' ¹³ So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the city and you will meet a man carrying a pitcher of water. Follow him, ¹⁴ and say to the owner of the house which he enters, "The Master says: Where is the room for me to eat the Passover with my disciples?"' ¹⁵ He will show you a large upper room furnished with couches, all prepared. Make the preparations for us there.' ¹⁶ The disciples set out and went to the city and found everything as he had told them, and prepared the Passover. ¹⁷ When evening came, he arrived with the Twelve. ¹⁸ And while they were at table eating, Jesus said, 'In truth I tell you, one of you is about to betray me, one of you eating with me.' ¹⁹ They were distressed and said to him, one after another, 'Not me, surely?' ²⁰ He said to them, 'It is one of the Twelve, one who is dipping into the same dish with me.' ²¹ Yes, the Son of man is going to his fate, as the scriptures say he will, but alas for that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! Better for that man if he had never been born.' ²² And as they were eating he took bread, and when he had said the blessing he broke it and gave it to them. 'Take it,' he said, 'this is my body.' ²³ Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he handed it to them, and all drank from it, ²⁴ and he said to them, 'This is my blood, the blood of the covenant, poured out for many.' ²⁵ In truth I tell you, I shall never drink wine any more until the day I drink the new wine in the kingdom of God.' ²⁶ After the psalms had been sung they left for the Mount of Olives. ²⁷ And Jesus said to them, 'You will all fall away, for the scripture says: I shall strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered; ²⁸ however, after my resurrection I shall go before you into Galilee.' ²⁹ Peter said, 'Even if all fall away, I will not.' ³⁰ And Jesus said to him, 'In truth I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will have disowned me three times.' ³¹ But he repeated still more earnestly, 'If I have to die with you, I will never disown you.' And they all said the same.

- **+ Mark 14: 10-11. Judas decides to betray Jesus.**

In complete contrast with the woman, Judas, one of the twelve, decides to betray Jesus and conspires with the enemies who promise him money. Judas goes on living with Jesus, with the sole objective of finding an occasion to hand Jesus over. When Mark was writing his Gospel, there were disciples who were waiting for the right

moment to leave the community that was the cause of their persecution. Or, perhaps, they were waiting for the moment to draw some advantage by handing over their companions. And we today?

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

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

+ Mark 14: 17-21. The Announcement of Judas’ Betrayal.

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

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

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

+ Mark 14: 26-28. The announcement of the flight of all.

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

+ Mark 14:29-31. The Announcement of Peter’s Denial.

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

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

³² They came to a plot of land called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, 'Stay here while I pray.' ³³ Then he took Peter and James and John with him. ³⁴ And he

began to feel terror and anguish. And he said to them, 'My soul is sorrowful to the point of death. Wait here, and stay awake.'³⁵ And going on a little further he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, this hour might pass him by.³⁶ 'Abba, Father!' he said, 'For you everything is possible. Take this cup away from me. But let it be as you, not I, would have it.'³⁷ He came back and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, 'Simon, are you asleep? Had you not the strength to stay awake one hour?'³⁸ Stay awake and pray not to be put to the test. The spirit is willing enough, but human nature is weak.'³⁹ Again he went away and prayed, saying the same words.⁴⁰ And once more he came back and found them sleeping, their eyes were so heavy; and they could find no answer for him.⁴¹ He came back a third time and said to them, 'You can sleep on now and have your rest. It is all over. The hour has come. Now the Son of man is to be betrayed into the hands of sinners.'⁴² Get up! Let us go! My betrayer is not far away.'⁴³ And at once, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, came up and with him a number of men armed with swords and clubs, sent by the chief priests and the scribes and the elders.⁴⁴ Now the traitor had arranged a signal with them saying, 'The one I kiss, he is the man. Arrest him, and see he is well guarded when you lead him away.'⁴⁵ So when the traitor came, he went up to Jesus at once and said, 'Rabbi!' and kissed him.⁴⁶ The others seized him and arrested him.⁴⁷ Then one of the bystanders drew his sword and struck out at the high priest's servant and cut off his ear.⁴⁸ Then Jesus spoke. 'Am I a bandit,' he said, 'that you had to set out to capture me with swords and clubs?'⁴⁹ I was among you teaching in the Temple day after day and you never laid a hand on me. But this is to fulfil the scriptures.'⁵⁰ And they all deserted him and ran away.⁵¹ A young man followed with nothing on but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him,⁵² but he left the cloth in their hands and ran away naked.

+ Mark 14: 32-42. The Attitude of the Disciples during Jesus' Agony.

In the Garden, Jesus begins his agony and asks Peter, James and John to pray for him. He is sad and begins to be afraid, He seeks the support of his friends. But they fall asleep. They are not able to watch an hour with him. And this three times! Again, we see an immense contrast between the attitude of Jesus and that of the three disciples! It is here in the Garden and at the time of the agony of Jesus that the courage of the disciples disintegrates. There is nothing left!

+ Mark 14:43-52. The Attitude of the Disciples when Jesus was Arrested

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

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

⁵³ They led Jesus off to the high priest; and all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes assembled there.⁵⁴ Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the high priest's palace, and was sitting with the attendants warming himself at the fire.⁵⁵ The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus in

order to have him executed. But they could not find any.⁵⁶ Several, indeed, brought false witness against him, but their evidence was conflicting.⁵⁷ Some stood up and submitted this false evidence against him,⁵⁸ 'We heard him say, "I am going to destroy this Temple made by human hands, and in three days build another, not made by human hands."⁵⁹ But even on this point their evidence was conflicting.⁶⁰ The high priest then rose before the whole assembly and put this question to Jesus, 'Have you no answer to that? What is this evidence these men are bringing against you?'⁶¹ But he was silent and made no answer at all. The high priest put a second question to him saying, 'Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?'⁶² 'I am,' said Jesus, 'and you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven.'⁶³ The high priest tore his robes and said, 'What need of witnesses have we now?'⁶⁴ You heard the blasphemy. What is your finding?' Their verdict was unanimous: he deserved to die.⁶⁵ Some of them started spitting at his face, hitting him and saying, 'Play the prophet!' And the attendants struck him too.⁶⁶ While Peter was down below in the courtyard, one of the high priest's servant-girls came up.⁶⁷ She saw Peter warming himself there, looked closely at him and said, 'You too were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth.'⁶⁸ But he denied it. 'I do not know, I do not understand what you are talking about,' he said. And he went out into the forecourt, and a cock crowed.⁶⁹ The servant-girl saw him and again started telling the bystanders, 'This man is one of them.'⁷⁰ But again he denied it. A little later the bystanders themselves said to Peter, 'You are certainly one of them! Why, you are a Galilean.'⁷¹ But he started cursing and swearing, 'I do not know the man you speak of.'⁷² And at once the cock crowed for the second time, and Peter recalled what Jesus had said to him, 'Before the cock crows twice, you will have disowned me three times.' And he burst into tears.

15:1 First thing in the morning, the chief priests, together with the elders and scribes and the rest of the Sanhedrin, had their plan ready. They had Jesus bound and took him away and handed him over to Pilate.² Pilate put to him this question, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' He replied, 'It is you who say it.'³ And the chief priests brought many accusations against him.⁴ Pilate questioned him again, 'Have you no reply at all? See how many accusations they are bringing against you!'⁵ But, to Pilate's surprise, Jesus made no further reply.⁶ At festival time Pilate used to release a prisoner for them, any one they asked for.⁷ Now a man called Barabbas was then in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the uprising.⁸ When the crowd went up and began to ask Pilate the customary favor,⁹ Pilate answered them, 'Do you want me to release for you the king of the Jews?'¹⁰ For he realized it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over.¹¹ The chief priests, however, had incited the crowd to demand that he should release Barabbas for them instead.¹² Then Pilate spoke again, 'But in that case, what am I to do with the man you call king of the Jews?'¹³ They shouted back, 'Crucify him!'¹⁴ Pilate asked them, 'What harm has he done?' But they shouted all the louder, 'Crucify him!'¹⁵ So Pilate, anxious to placate the crowd, released Barabbas for them and, after having Jesus scourged, he handed him over to be crucified.¹⁶ The soldiers led him away to the inner part of the palace, that is, the Praetorium, and called the whole cohort together.¹⁷ They

dressed him up in purple, twisted some thorns into a crown and put it on him.¹⁸ And they began saluting him, 'Hail, king of the Jews!' ¹⁹ They struck his head with a reed and spat on him; and they went down on their knees to do him homage.²⁰ And when they had finished making fun of him, they took off the purple and dressed him in his own clothes. They led him out to crucify him.

+ Mark 14: 53-65. Jesus is Condemned by the Supreme Court

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

+ Mark 14: 66-72. Peter's Denial

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

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

The trial goes on. Jesus is handed over to the Roman powers and accused of being *Messiah King* (Mk 15: 2; cf. Mc 15: 25). Others suggest the alternative of Barabbas, "in prison with the rebels." (Mk 15: 7) They see Jesus as an anti-Roman *Warring* Messiah. After he is sentenced, they spit on Jesus, but he will not open his mouth. Here again we see the *Messiah Servant* announced by Isaiah (cf Is 50: 6-8).

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

²¹ They enlisted a passer-by, Simon of Cyrene, father of Alexander and Rufus, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross. ²² They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha, which means the place of the skull. ²³ They offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he refused it. ²⁴ Then they crucified him, and shared out his clothing, casting lots to decide what each should get. ²⁵ It was the third hour when they crucified him. ²⁶ The inscription giving the charge against him read, 'The King of the Jews'. ²⁷ And they crucified two bandits with him, one on his right and one on his left. ^[28] ²⁹ The passers-by jeered at him; they shook their heads and said, 'Aha! So you would destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days! ³⁰ Then save yourself; come down from the cross!' ³¹ The chief priests and the scribes mocked him among themselves in the same way with the words, 'He saved others, he cannot save himself. ³² Let the Christ, the king of Israel, come down from the cross now, for us to see it and believe.' Even those who were crucified with him taunted him. ³³ When the

sixth hour came there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.³⁴ And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, '*Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani?*' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'³⁵ When some of those who stood by heard this, they said, 'Listen, he is calling on Elijah.'³⁶ Someone ran and soaked a sponge in vinegar and, putting it on a reed, gave it to him to drink saying, 'Wait! And see if Elijah will come to take him down.'³⁷ But Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.³⁸ And the veil of the Sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom.³⁹ The centurion, who was standing in front of him, had seen how he had died, and he said, 'In truth this man was Son of God.'

+ Mark 15: 21-22. Simon Carries the Cross

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

+ Mark 15: 23-32. The crucifixion.

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

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

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

• Mark 15: 40-16: 8: At the Sepulchre of Jesus

⁴⁰ There were some women watching from a distance. Among them were Mary of Magdala, Mary who was the mother of James the younger and Joseph, and Salome.

⁴¹ These used to follow him and look after him when he was in Galilee. And many other women were there who had come up to Jerusalem with him. ⁴² It was now evening, and since it was Preparation Day -- that is, the day before the Sabbath - ⁴³ there came Joseph of Arimathaea, a prominent member of the Council, who himself lived in the hope of seeing the kingdom of God, and he boldly went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁴⁴ Pilate, astonished that he should have died so soon, summoned the centurion and enquired if he had been dead for some time. ⁴⁵ Having been assured of this by the centurion, he granted the corpse to Joseph ⁴⁶ who bought a shroud, took Jesus down from the cross, wrapped him in the shroud and

laid him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the entrance to the tomb.⁴⁷ Mary of Magdala and Mary the mother of Joseph took note of where he was laid.

16:1 When the Sabbath was over, Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices with which to go and anoint him.² And very early in the morning on the first day of the week they went to the tomb when the sun had risen.³ They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?'⁴ But when they looked they saw that the stone -- which was very big -- had already been rolled back.⁵ On entering the tomb they saw a young man in a white robe seated on the right-hand side, and they were struck with amazement.⁶ But he said to them, 'There is no need to be so amazed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified: he has risen, he is not here. See, here is the place where they laid him.'⁷ But you must go and tell his disciples and Peter, "He is going ahead of you to Galilee; that is where you will see him, just as he told you."⁸ And the women came out and ran away from the tomb because they were frightened out of their wits; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

+ Mark 15: 40-47. The Burial of Jesus

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

+ Mark 16: 1-8. The Announcement of the Resurrection

The first day of the week, early in the morning, these same women go to embalm the body of Jesus. They find the sepulchre open. They are witnesses of the resurrection. An angel says to them that Jesus is risen and gives them an *order*: "go and tell his disciples and Peter, „He is going ahead of you to Galilee; that is where you will see him, just as he told you“" (Mk 16:7). In Galilee, on the shores of the lake, where everything had begun, there also everything will begin again. It is Jesus who invites! He will not give up, not even in the face of the abandonment of his disciples! He calls again! He always calls!

- **The Final Failure as a New Call to be Disciple**

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

- o **The failure of those chosen:** The twelve who were specially called and chosen by Jesus (Mk 3: 13-19) and sent in mission by him (Mk 16: 7-13), fail. Fail completely. Judas betrays, Peter denies, all run away, no one stays. Total dispersion! Seemingly, there is not much difference between them and the authorities who decree the death of Jesus. Like Peter, they too want to eliminate the cross and want a glorious Messiah, king, blessed son of God. But there is one deep and real difference! The disciples, in spite of all their faults and weaknesses, hold no malice. They do not have any evil intention. They are an almost faithful replica of all of us who *walk the way of Jesus*, falling all the time but always getting up again!
- o **Fidelity of those not chosen:** As a counterpoint to the failure of some, the strength of faith of others is presented, those who were not part of the chosen twelve:
 1. An anonymous woman from Bethania. She accepted Jesus as Messiah *Servant* and, thus, she anoints him in anticipation of his burial. Jesus praises her. She is a model for all.
 2. Simon of Cyrene, father of a family. He is forced by the soldiers to do that which Jesus had asked of the twelve who ran away. He carries the cross behind Jesus to Calvary.
 3. The centurion, a pagan. At the moment of death, he makes his profession of faith and recognizes the Son of God in the tortured and crucified man, one cursed according to Jewish law.
 4. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome, “and many other women were there who had come up to Jerusalem with him” (Mk 15: 41). They did not abandon Jesus, but determinedly stayed at the foot of the cross and close to the tomb of Jesus.
 5. Joseph of Arimathaea, a member of the Sanhedrin, who risked everything by asking for the body of Jesus to bury him. The twelve failed. The continuation of the message of the Kingdom did not pass through them, but through others, particularly the women, who will be given a clear *order* to go call back those failed men (Mk 16: 7). And today, through whom does the message pass on?
- o **The attitude of Jesus:** The manner in which the Gospel of Mark presents the attitude of Jesus during the telling of the passion is meant to give hope even to the most discouraged and failed of the disciples! Because no matter how great the betrayal of the Twelve was, the love of Jesus was always greater! When Jesus announces that the disciples will run away, he already tells them that he will wait for them in Galilee. Even though he knew of the betrayal (Mk 14: 18), the denial (Mk 14: 30) the flight (Mk 14: 27), he goes on with the gesture of the Eucharist. And on the morning of Easter, the angel, through the women, sends a message to Peter who had denied him, and to all the others who had fled, that they must go to Galilee. The place where everything had begun is the place where everything will begin again. The failure of the twelve does not bring about a break in the covenant signed and sealed in the blood of Jesus.

- **The Model of the Disciple: Follow, Service, Go up**

Mark emphasizes the presence of the women who follow and serve Jesus from the time he was in Galilee and who go up to Jerusalem with him (Mk 15: 40-41). Mark uses

three words to define the relationship of the women with Jesus: Follow! Serve! Go up! They "*followed and looked after*" Jesus and together with many other women "*went up* with him to Jerusalem" (Mk 15: 41). These are the three words that define an ideal disciple. They are the models for the other disciples who had fled!

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

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

An Aid to Reflection

- What touched me most in the attitude of the twelve apostles and in the attitude of the women during the passion and death of Jesus? What would you have done were you present? Would you have acted like the men or the women?
- What touched you most in the attitude of Jesus concerning his disciples in the narration of his passion and death? Why?
- What is the special message of the narration of the passion and death in Mark's Gospel? Have you worked out the differences between the narration of the passion and death in the Gospel of Mark and that in the other Gospels? What are these differences?

Prayer of a Psalm: Psalm 22 (21)

The Psalm that Jesus Prayed on the Cross

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? The words of my groaning do nothing to save me.

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

Yet you, the Holy One, who make your home in the praises of Israel, in you our ancestors put their trust, they trusted and you set them free.

To you they called for help and were delivered; in you they trusted and were not put to shame. But I am a worm, less than human, scorn of mankind, contempt of the people; all who see me jeer at me, they sneer and wag their heads, 'He trusted himself to

Yahweh, let Yahweh set him free!

Let him deliver him, as he took such delight in him.'

It was you who drew me from the womb and soothed me on my mother's breast. On you was I cast from my birth, from the womb I have belonged to you. Do not hold aloof, for trouble is upon me, and no one to help me!

Many bulls are encircling me, wild bulls of Bashan closing in on me.

Lions ravaging and roaring open their jaws at me. My strength is trickling away, my bones are all disjointed, my heart has turned to wax, melting inside me.

My mouth is dry as earthenware, my tongue sticks to my jaw.

You lay me down in the dust of death. A pack of dogs surrounds me, a gang of villains closing in on me as if to hack off my hands and my feet. I can count every one of my bones, while they look on and gloat; they divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.

Yahweh, do not hold aloof!

My strength, come quickly to my help, rescue my soul from the sword, the one life I have from the grasp of the dog! Save me from the lion's mouth, my poor life from the wild bulls' horns!

I shall proclaim your name to my brothers, praise you in full assembly: 'You who fear Yahweh, praise him! All the race of Jacob, honor him! Revere him, all the race of Israel!'

For he has not despised nor disregarded the poverty of the poor, has not turned away his face, but has listened to the cry for help.

Of you is my praise in the thronged assembly, I will perform my vows before all who fear him.

The poor will eat and be filled, those who seek Yahweh will praise him, 'May your heart live forever.'

The whole wide world will remember and return to Yahweh, all the families of nations bow down before him. For to Yahweh, ruler of the nations, belongs kingly power!

All who prosper on earth will bow before him, all who go down to the dust will do reverence before him. And those who are dead, their descendants will serve him, will proclaim his name to generations still to come; and these will tell of his saving justice to a people yet unborn: he has fulfilled it.

Final Prayer

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

Monday, March 29, 2021

Holy Week

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,

you have called your people to be the servant of one another in the cause of justice and mercy. You showed us in Jesus, your Son, what it means to serve and how much this may cost us. Fill us with the Spirit of Jesus, that we too may not break those who are weak nor repel those groping in the dark.

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

Gospel Reading - John 12: 1-11

Six days before the Passover, Jesus went to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom he had raised from the dead. They gave a dinner for him there; Martha waited on them and Lazarus was among those at table. Mary brought in a pound of very costly ointment, pure nard, and with it anointed the feet of Jesus, wiping them with her hair; the house was filled with the scent of the ointment. Then Judas Iscariot -- one of his disciples, the man who was to betray him--said, 'Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?'

He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he was in charge of the common fund and used to help himself to the contents. So, Jesus said, 'Leave her alone; let her keep it for the day of my burial. You have the poor with you always, you will not always have me.'

Meanwhile a large number of Jews heard that he was there and came not only on account of Jesus but also to see Lazarus whom he had raised from the dead. Then the chief priests decided to kill Lazarus as well, since it was on his account that many of the Jews were leaving them and believing in Jesus.

Reflection

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

- John 12: 1-2: Jesus persecuted by the Jews, goes to Bethany. Six days before the Passover, Jesus went to Bethany to the house of his friends Martha and Mary and of Lazarus. Bethany means, House of Poverty. The police was looking for him (Jn 11: 57). They wanted to kill him (Jn 11: 50). But even now that the police was looking for Jesus, Mary, Martha and Lazarus received him in their house and offered him something to eat. Because love overcomes fear.
- John 12: 3: Mary anoints Jesus. During the meal, Mary anoints the feet of Jesus with a pound of perfume of pure spikenard (cf. Lk 7: 36-50). It was a very costly perfume, so very expensive that it cost three hundred denarii. Then she dried his feet with her hair. The whole house was filled with the scent of the ointment. Mary does not speak during this whole episode. She only acts. The gesture filled with symbolism speaks for itself. In washing the feet, Mary becomes a servant. Jesus will repeat the gesture at the Last Supper (Jn 13: 5).
- John 12: 4-6: Reaction of Judas. Judas criticizes the gesture of Mary. He thinks that it is a waste. In fact, three hundred denarii were the wages of three hundred days! The wages of almost a whole year spent in one time alone! Judas thinks that the money should have been given to the poor. The Evangelist comments and says that Judas had no concern at all for the poor, but that he was a thief. They had a common fund and he stole the money. A strong judgment which condemns Judas. It does not condemn the concern for the poor, but the hypocrisy which uses the poor for self-promotion and to enrich oneself. Judas, in his own egoistic interests, thought only about money. This is why he was not aware of what Mary kept in her heart. Jesus reads in the heart and defends Mary.
- John 12: 7-8: Jesus defends the woman. Judas thinks only of the waste and criticizes the woman. Jesus thinks of the gesture and defends the woman: “Leave her alone; so that she can keep it for the day of my burial!” And immediately Jesus says: “You have the poor with you always; you will not always have me!” Which of the two lived closer to Jesus: Judas or Mary? Judas, the disciple, lived together with Jesus for almost three years, twenty-four hours a day. He was part of the group. Mary saw him once or twice a year, on the occasion of some feast, when Jesus went to Jerusalem and visited her in her house. But to live together with, not having any love does not help us to know others. Rather it blinds people. Judas was blind. Many people live together with Jesus and praise him even with many hymns, but do not truly know him and do not reveal him (cf. Mt 7: 21). Two affirmations of Jesus merit a more detailed comment: (a) “You have the poor with you always” and (b) let her keep it for the day of my burial.”
 - o **“You have the poor with you always.”** Is it perhaps that Jesus wants to say that we should not be concerned about the poor, given the fact that there will always be poor? Or does he want to say that poverty is the destiny imposed by God? How is this phrase to be understood? At that time, persons knew the Old Testament by heart. It sufficed for Jesus to begin quoting a phrase of the Old Testament and persons already knew the rest. The beginning of the phrase said: “There will never cease to be poor people in the country.” (Dt 15: 11^a) The

rest of the phrase which people already knew and which Jesus wants to remind is the following: “And this is why I am giving you this command: always be open handed with your brother, and with anyone in your country who is in need and is poor!” (Dt 15: 11b). According to this Law, the community should accept the poor and share its goods with them. But Judas instead of “opening his hand to help the poor” and to share his goods with them, wanted to do charity with the money of others! He wanted to sell the perfume of Mary for three hundred denarii and use it to help the poor. Jesus quotes the Law of God which taught the contrary. Anyone who, like Judas, carries out a campaign with the money of the sale of the goods of other does not disturb or trouble. But, the one who, like Jesus, insists on the obligation to accept the poor and to share with them one’s own goods, this one disturbs, troubles and runs the risk of being condemned.

- o John 12: 9-11: The crowds and the authority. To be the friend of Jesus could be dangerous. Lazarus is in danger of death because of the new life received from Jesus. The Jews had decided to kill him. Lazarus alive was a living proof that Jesus was the Messiah. This is why the crowd was looking for him, because people wanted to experience closely the living proof of the power of Jesus. A living community runs the risk of its life because it is the living proof of the Good News of God!

Personal Questions

- Mary was misinterpreted by Judas. Have you been misinterpreted sometimes?
- What does this text of Mary teach us? What does the reaction of Judas say to us?

Concluding Prayer

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

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

Tuesday, March 30, 2021

Holy Week

Opening Prayer

Lord our God, your Son Jesus Christ had to undergo the humiliation of being betrayed and denied by those he called his friends. But he made his suffering and death into instruments of love and reconciliation.

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

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

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

Having said this, Jesus was deeply disturbed and declared, 'In all truth I tell you, one of you is going to betray me.' The disciples looked at each other, wondering whom he meant. The disciple Jesus loved was reclining next to Jesus; Simon Peter signed to him and said, 'Ask who it is he means,' so leaning back close to Jesus' chest he said, 'Who is it, Lord?' Jesus answered, 'It is the one to whom I give the piece of bread that I dip in the dish.' And when he had dipped the piece of bread he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. At that instant, after Judas had taken the bread, Satan entered him. Jesus then said, 'What you are going to do, do quickly.'

None of the others at table understood why he said this. Since Judas had charge of the common fund, some of them thought Jesus was telling him, 'Buy what we need for the festival,' or telling him to give something to the poor. As soon as Judas had taken the piece of bread he went out. It was night. When he had gone, Jesus said: Now has the Son of man been glorified, and in him God has been glorified. If God has been glorified in him, God will in turn glorify him in himself, and will glorify him very soon. Little children, I shall be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and, as I told the Jews, where I am going, you cannot come.

Simon Peter said, 'Lord, where are you going?' Jesus replied, 'Now you cannot follow me where I am going, but later you shall follow me.' Peter said to him, 'Why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.' 'Lay down your life for me?' answered Jesus. 'In all truth I tell you, before the cock crows you will have disowned me three times.'

Reflection

- This is the third day of Holy Week. The texts of the Gospel of these days place before us the terrible facts which will lead to the imprisonment and condemnation of Jesus. The texts not only present the decisions of the religious and civil authority against Jesus, but also the betrayal and the negotiations of the disciples which rendered possible for the authority to arrest Jesus and contributed enormously to increase the suffering of Jesus.
- John 13: 21: The announcement of the betrayal. After having washed the feet of the disciples (Jn 13: 2-11) and having spoken about the obligation that we have of washing each other's feet (Jn 13: 12-16), Jesus is profoundly touched. And it is no wonder. He was fulfilling that gesture of service and total gift of self, while at his side one of the disciples was planning how to betray him that same night. Jesus expresses his emotion saying: "In all truth I tell you one of you is going to betray me!" He does not say: "Judas will betray me," but "one of you." It is one of his group who will betray him.
- John 13: 22-25: The reaction of the disciples. The disciples are frightened. They did not expect that declaration, that is, that one of them would be the traitor. Peter makes a sign to John to ask Jesus which of the twelve would be the traitor. This is a sign that

they did not know one another well, they could not succeed in understanding who could be the traitor. A sign, that is, that the friendship among them had not as yet reached the same transparency that Jesus had with them (cf. Jn 15: 15). John reclined near Jesus and asked him: “Who is it?”

- John 13: 26-30: Jesus indicates Judas. Jesus says: It is the one to whom I give the piece of bread that I dip in the dish. He took a piece of bread, dips it in the cup and hands it over to Judas. This was a common and normal gesture which the participants at a supper used to do among themselves. And Jesus tells Judas: “What you are going to do, do quickly!” Judas had charge of the common fund. He was in charge of buying things and of giving the alms to the poor. This is why no one perceived anything special in the gesture and in the words of Jesus. In this description of the announcement of the betrayal is evoked the Psalm in which the psalmist complains about the friend who betrays him: “Even my trusted friend on whom I relied, who shared my table takes advantage of me” (Ps 41: 10; cf. Ps 55: 13-15). Judas becomes aware that Jesus knew everything (cf. Jn 13: 18). But even knowing it, he does not change his mind but keeps the decision to betray Jesus. This is the moment in which the separation between Judas and Jesus takes place. John says at this moment Satan entered him. Judas rises and leaves. He places himself at the side of the enemy (Satan). John comments: “It was night.” It was dark.
- John 13: 31-33: The glorification of Jesus begins. It is as if history had waited for this moment of separation between light and darkness. Satan (the enemy) and darkness entered into Judas when he decides to carry out what he was planning. In that moment the light was made in Jesus who declares: “Now the son of man has been glorified, and in him God has been glorified also. If God has been glorified in him, God will in turn glorify him in himself, and will glorify him very soon!” Everything which will happen from now on will be in the regressive way. The decisions had already been taken by Jesus (Jn 12: 27-28) and now by Judas. The facts follow one another hastily. And, Jesus announces it: “Little children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and, as I told the Jews, where I am going you cannot come”. There is little time left before the Passover.
- John 13: 34-35: The new commandment. Today’s Gospel omits these two verses on the new commandment of love, and begins to speak about the announcement of the denial of Peter.
- John 13: 36-38: Announcement of the denial of Peter. Together with the betrayal of Judas, the Gospel also speaks of the denial of Peter. These are the two facts which contribute the most to Jesus suffering and pain. Peter says that he is ready to give his life for Jesus. Jesus recalls and reminds him of reality: “You are ready to lay down your life for me? In all truth I tell you, before the cock crows you will have disowned me three times”. Mark had written: “Before the cock crows twice, you will have disowned me three times” (Mk 14: 30). Everybody knows that the cock crows rapidly. When in the morning the first cock begins to sing, almost at the same time all the cocks crow together. Peter is more rapid in his denial than the cock in crowing.

Personal Questions

- Judas, the friend, becomes the traitor. Peter, the friend, denies Jesus. And I?
- I place myself in Jesus' situation and I think: how does he face the denial and the betrayal, the contempt and the exclusion?

Concluding Prayer

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

Wednesday, March 31, 2021

Holy Week

Opening Prayer

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

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

Gospel Reading - Matthew 26: 14-25

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

Reflection

- Yesterday the Gospel spoke of the betrayal of Judas and of the denial of Peter. Today, it speaks once again of the betrayal of Judas. In the description of the Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, the failure of the disciples is strongly stressed. In spite of having lived three years together with Jesus, not one of them defends Jesus. Judas betrays Him, Peter denies Him, and the others flee. Matthew narrates everything, not to criticize or to condemn, neither to discourage the readers, but in order to underline that acceptance and the love of Jesus exceed the defeat and the failure of the disciples! This way of describing the attitude of Jesus was a help for the Communities at the time of Matthew. Because of the frequent persecutions, many were discouraged and had abandoned the community and asked themselves: "Will it be possible to return? Will God accept and forgive us?" Matthew responds by suggesting that we can break the relationship with Jesus, but Jesus never breaks it with us. His love is greater than our infidelity. This is a very important message which we get from the Gospel during Holy Week.
- Matthew 26: 14-16: The Decision of Judas to betray Jesus. Judas took the decision after Jesus did not accept the criticism of the disciples concerning the woman who wastes a very expensive perfume only to anoint Jesus (Mt 26: 6-13). He went to the chief priest and asked: "What are you prepared to give Me if I hand Him over to you?" They agreed on the sum of thirty silver pieces. Matthew recalls the words of the Prophet Zechariah to describe the price agreed upon (Zc 11: 12). At the same time, the betrayal of Jesus for thirty silver coins recalls the sale of Joseph by his brothers, decided by the buyers for twenty coins (Gn 37: 28). It also is reminiscent of the price of thirty coins to be paid for the wounding of a slave. (Ex 21: 32)
- Matthew 26: 17-19: The preparation for the Passover. Jesus was coming from Galilee. He did not have a house in Jerusalem. He spent the night in the Garden of Olives (cf. Jn 8: 1). In the days of the feast of the Passover the people of Jerusalem increased three times in number because of the enormous number of pilgrims who went there from all parts. For Jesus it was not easy to find a big room to celebrate the Passover together with the pilgrims coming from Galilee. He ordered His disciples to find a person in whose house He had decided to celebrate the Passover. The Gospel does not offer any other information and allows the imagination to complete what is missing in the information. Was this a person known by Jesus? A relative? A disciple? Throughout the centuries the imagination of the Apocrypha has tried to complete this information, but with little credibility.
- Matthew 26: 20-25: The announcement of the betrayal of Judas. Jesus knew that He will be betrayed. In spite of the fact that Judas did things secretly. Jesus knew. But in spite of that, He wants to act fraternally with the group of friends to which Judas belongs. When all were together for the last time, Jesus announces who is the traitor "Someone who has dipped his hand into the dish with Me will betray Me." This way of announcing the betrayal renders even clearer the contrast. For the Jews, the communion around the table, to dip the hand together in the same dish, was the maximum expression of intimacy and trust. In this way, Matthew suggests that in

spite of the betrayal made by someone who was a friend, the love of Jesus is greater than the betrayal!

- What strikes us in the way in which Matthew describes these facts? Between the denial and the betrayal there is the institution of the Eucharist (Mt 26: 26-29): the betrayal of Judas first (Mt 26: 20-25); the denial of Peter and the flight of the disciples, afterwards (Mt 25: 30-35). Thus, he stressed for us the incredible love of Jesus, which exceeds the betrayal, the denial, and the flight of the friends. His love does not depend on what others do for Him.

Personal Questions

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

Concluding Prayer

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

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