

5th Sunday of Lent - C

Note: If there are some of The Elect at the Mass, the readings given for Cycle A may be used. The alternate Gospel reading is about the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Just as Jesus raised Lazarus, He will lift up The Elect at the Easter Vigil Mass.

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Isaiah 43:16-21

Last week we heard of the conclusion of the exodus from Egypt; the first Passover celebration in the land of Canaan. This week we look forward to a new exodus that God promises through the prophet Isaiah. This new exodus promises to be far more wonderful than the first. God promises to restore His people after they have suffered in exile.

¹⁶ Thus says the LORD,

Isaiah assures his hearers that he is delivering God's words, not his own.

who opens a way in the sea and a path in the mighty waters, ¹⁷ Who leads out chariots and horsemen, a powerful army,

A series of statements which answer the question "who is Yahweh?". The statements portray the exodus out of Egypt.

Till they lie prostrate together, never to rise, snuffed out and quenched like a wick.

The Egyptians have been overcome. A completed action.

¹⁸ Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not;

Although we are to learn from history, we are not to dwell in the past.

¹⁹ See, I am doing something new!

God is doing a new redemptive act which we must see and recognize. This new redemptive act which is going on now, is a new exodus, an exodus from slavery to sin and a new birth in God. This new exodus comes to fulfillment in the Eucharist (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24-26) through which we receive eternal life.

Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? In the desert I make a way, in the wasteland, rivers. ²⁰ Wild beasts honor me, jackals and ostriches, For I put water in the desert and rivers in the wasteland for my chosen people to drink, ²¹ The people whom I formed for myself, that they might announce my praise.

The Septuagint reads “the people whom I purchased” which is the phrase which is used in Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 2:9.

2nd Reading - Philippians 3:8-14

Our second reading today is from Paul’s warning to the Philippians about false teachers; Judaizers who would try to hang on to the old ways while at the same time claiming to be Christians. The Judaizers taught that in order to be a Christian, you first had to be a Jew: to be circumcised and to obey all 613 Old Covenant commandments. This question, whether or not Gentile converts to Christianity must first become full and legal Jews, prompted the Council of Jerusalem (ca. AD 50). A summary of the activities of the Council of Jerusalem comprises Acts 15.

⁸ [] I consider everything as a loss

All the Jewish ritual practices. In the preceding verses Paul has scoffed at circumcision rather strongly.

because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

The knowledge of Christ accorded to the apostle in the revelation on the road to Damascus inaugurated a relationship between him and Christ that far surpassed all former advantages.

For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish,

Can also be translated “dung.” A strong expression for what Paul once regarded so highly.

that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him,

The knowledge of Christ as an intellectual acquisition is not sufficient. Saint Paul describes his communion with Christ as a goal to be attained – a race still to be run (Philippians 2:6; 1 Corinthians 9:24; 2 Timothy 4:7). This communion with Christ is an identification ever to be deepened until it reaches its consummation at the parousia.

not having any righteousness of my own based on the law

The goal of his life as a Pharisee was to be found blameless in the sight of God through observance of the 613 prescriptions of the Mosaic law.

but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God,

His uprightness is that which is freely bestowed by God and is dependent only on man’s willingness and humility to accept the fact that he must seek his salvation not in himself, but in God through faith.

“Righteousness comes from faith, which means that it too is a gift of God. For since this righteousness belongs to God, it is an unmerited gift. And the gifts of God greatly exceed any achievements of our own zeal.” [Saint John Chrysostom (between A.D. 398-404), *Homilies on the Epistle to the Philippians* 12,3,7-9]

depending on faith ¹⁰ to know him

To “know Christ” means to experience Him as “life giving spirit” (1 Corinthians 15:45; 2 Corinthians 3:17).

and the power of his resurrection

As of the resurrection, the risen Christ possessed a “glory” bestowed by the Father, the vital principle of the new Christian life, the New Creation. We have this life giving spirit.

and (the) sharing of his sufferings

It is precisely in the weakness of suffering that one experiences most forcefully the power that is working in the resurrection (see 2 Corinthians 4:7-18).

“From faith comes our sharing in His sufferings. How? If we had not believed in Him, we would not be suffering with Him. If we had not believed that we will abide and reign with Him, we would not have endured these sufferings.” [Saint John Chrysostom (between A.D. 398-404), *Homilies on the Epistle to the Philippians* 12,3,10-11]

by being conformed to his death,

The path to resurrection for the Christian follows that of Christ: the more perfect the “conformity,” the surer the arrival at the goal (see Romans 6:3-4; 8:17).

¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Note that this is a hope, not absolute assurance.

¹² It is not that I have already taken hold of it or have already attained perfect maturity,

The goal of Paul’s striving; and of Christian striving in general, is not yet attained in this life.

but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it,

Paul uses the image of a race to show that what matters is to leave past achievements behind and to focus attention on what lies ahead.

since I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ (Jesus).

Saint Paul is probably referring to his experience on the road to Damascus, and he has been pursuing the prize ever since.

¹³ Brothers, I for my part do not consider myself to have taken possession. Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize

At the end of a race the judge summoned the winner by name to ascend and to receive the victor's crown.

of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus.

God summons the Christian, when the race of our earthly life is complete, to ascend and join Christ in eternal life. This, and this alone, is the moment of purification; the moment of salvation.

Gospel - John 8:1-11

Today, as we prepare to enter the Easter season, we are reminded once again of God's infinite mercy. This mercy is proclaimed through Jesus and is offered to the woman taken in adultery. Jesus confronts those men with the quiet words "let the man among you who has no sin be the first to cast a stone at her." In one stroke Jesus proclaims the forgiving love of God and confronts the sinfulness of the accusers.

All of us have sinned. All of us must turn to the Lord in grateful thanksgiving for His mercy rather than lashing out at others in self-righteous anger. The passage which constitutes our reading today is absent from many early manuscripts, not appearing until around the third century, but it was in the Vulgate when the Magisterium, at the Council of Trent (1545-1563) [and one must assume at the Council of Hippo (393) which defined the list of New Testament books and the Council of Carthage (397) which declared them inspired, although neither are ecumenical councils] defined the canon of sacred scripture. Therefore, the Church regards it as canonical and inspired. Saint Augustine said the reason doubts were raised about this passage was that it shows Jesus to be so merciful that some rigorists thought it would lead to a relaxation of moral rules – and therefore copyists suppressed it from their manuscripts.

^{8:1} while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

This place was to the east of Jerusalem. The Kidron Valley divides it from the hill on which the temple was located. Although this reading is located in the gospel fairly early in Jesus' life, the synoptic gospel accounts of Passion Week show that Jesus spent the days in Jerusalem teaching but left the city each night for safety. From ancient times it had been a place for prayer; David went there to adore God during the difficult period when Absalom was in revolt (2 Samuel 15:32), and there the prophet Ezekiel contemplated the glory of Yahweh entering the temple (Ezekiel 43:1-4).

² But early in the morning he arrived again in the temple area, and all the people started

coming to him, and he sat down and taught them. ³ Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and made her stand in the middle. ⁴ They said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. ⁵ Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women.

Deuteronomy 22:23 decrees stoning for a betrothed virgin who has committed adultery, but for an adulterous wife Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22 prescribe death without specifying the manner of execution.

So what do you say?”

John 18:31 tells us that the Romans had deprived the Jews of the right to carry out the death penalty in cases where their law required it.

⁶ They said this to test him, so that they could have some charge to bring against him.

Similar to the tribute money trap of Mark 12:13-17, Jesus must, so His opponents think, reject either the law of Moses or the authority of Rome.

Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger.

This is the only passage in scripture where Jesus is said to have written anything. Patristic authors suggest that Jesus was invoking Jeremiah 17:13 *“Lord, on whom Israel’s hope is fixed, all who reject you will be inscribed in the dust, for they have rejected the source of living water, the Lord.”* Or it could be no more than Jesus idly tracing figures on the ground to indicate disinterest in the proceedings.

⁷ But when they continued asking him, he straightened up and said to them,

Characteristically, Jesus refuses to deal with the case as merely a legal matter, but treats it practically.

“Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

In a capital case, the witnesses against the accused were to take the initiative in carrying out the execution (Deuteronomy 17:7). Jesus asks them to think first whether their own conscience proclaims them worthy to sit in judgement. Typically, Pharisees thought of themselves as sinless but Jesus had on other occasions made it clear that He did not consider them so. If they threw the first stones and were arrested by the Romans, they could not use the excuse that He had told them to do it.

⁸ Again he bent down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ And in response, they went away one by one, beginning with the elders.

The elders are the wiser ones; they recognize that their trap has been reversed and that they are now in a dilemma: If they stone her they have no one to blame but themselves and will be fully

answerable to the Romans; if they don't, they will have rejected the Law of Moses. Rather than press forward with their charges, they retreat, perhaps being ashamed of having tried to use the woman's humiliation as a means of ensnaring a man.

So he was left alone with the woman before him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹ She replied, "No one, sir." Then Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you.

After the accusers have left, Jesus makes it clear that He is not ranked among them.

Go, (and) from now on do not sin any more."

The lesson of this story is not that sin is of no importance, or that God does not punish sin, but that God extends mercy to the sinner that he may turn from his sin. He condemns the sin but not the sinner.