

# FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY

27<sup>th</sup> - 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023

## Fifth Week of Lent

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### Collect for the Fifth Sunday of Lent

By your help, we beseech you, Lord our God, may we walk eagerly in that same charity with which, out of love for the world, your Son handed himself over to death. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever.

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## Monday in the Fifth Week of Lent

### Reading

*John 8:1-11 (RSV)*

#### *The Woman Caught in Adultery*

Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. <sup>2</sup> Early in the morning he came again to the temple; all the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. <sup>3</sup> The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst <sup>4</sup> they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. <sup>5</sup> Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her?' <sup>6</sup> This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. <sup>7</sup> And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, 'Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.' <sup>8</sup> And once more he bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. <sup>9</sup> But when they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. <sup>10</sup> Jesus looked up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' <sup>11</sup> She said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again.'

### Reflection

'**ONLY** two remain' at the end of this story, St Augustine remarked, 'the wretched woman and the incarnation of mercy'. It's a strange story not

least because it almost certainly doesn't belong in St John's Gospel. It is missing from several manuscripts and is sometimes found in St Luke's Gospel, after Luke 21:38, just before the Passion Narrative. It certainly feels more like a St Luke story than a St John story and, putting it in St Luke would harmonise with St Luke's theme of Jesus withdrawing to pray on the Mount of Olives which is where this story begins. The importance of the passage floating between different sites – now Luke, now John – is that, though it is not a good fit into the overall pattern of events, it is clearly a very beautiful and valuable story. If we had lost it, we would have lost a great deal. For one thing, and typical of St Luke, is Jesus' immense empathy with women. He – the Judge of All – sits alongside this poor woman non-judgmentally. He merely doodles in the dust until the woman's accusers have all sidled off. Jesus doesn't condone the woman's sin - he tells her 'go and do not sin again' – but he is offering loving acceptance of her. If we are to understand the depths of the divine compassion, we need this story. And, of course, the woman caught *in flagrante* is a symbol of Israel – God's people were for ever going off with other gods – and, more recently, of the Church, where, all too often, sin cries out for punishment. But it is not only the woman who is the Church. So are her accusers.

## Tuesday in the Fifth Week of Lent

### Reading

*Numbers 21:4-9 (RSV)*

*Whoever looks at the Bronze Serpent on the Pole will live.*

<sup>4</sup> From Mount Hor the Israelites set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the people became impatient on the way. <sup>5</sup> And the people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.' <sup>6</sup> Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. <sup>7</sup> And the people came to Moses, and said, 'We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. <sup>8</sup> And the LORD said to Moses, 'Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and every one who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.' <sup>9</sup> So Moses made a bronze serpent, and set it on a pole; and if a serpent bit any man, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

## Reflection

**AT FIRST** sight, today's reading from Numbers offends our religious sensibilities. For one thing, how does setting up a bronze serpent survive the prohibition of graven images? The golden calf at Horeb (Exodus 32 and Psalm 106:19) caused great offence and disaster, whereas the bronze serpent, a later episode in Israel's journey, was the way of averting disaster. And can we really go along with the idea of looking at something and being healed and restored? Well, Jesus does! In John 3:14 we hear that the bronze serpent is a type of the saving Cross. There are important differences between the golden calf and the bronze serpent: the calf was manufactured by a rebellious people, pooling their gold, and forsaking the God with whom their leader, Moses, was communing. It was an act of disobedience. The bronze serpent, possibly the standard or symbol of the tribe of Levi, to which Moses and Aaron belonged, was God's instrument, rescuing a wounded and frightened people. Just like the Cross! Both bronze serpent and Cross are symbols of obedience. In our own troubled times, into which the psalm, used in full, speaks so eloquently, we shall find peace only in the Cross. Colossians 1:20 tells us that Christ reconciles 'to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his Cross'.

## Wednesday in the Fifth Week of Lent

### Reading

*Daniel 3 (RSV)*

*The Burning, Fiery Furnace*

Nebuchadnezzar said to them, 'Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image which I have set up? <sup>15</sup> Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image which I have made, well and good; but if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace; and who is the god that will deliver you out of my hands?'

<sup>16</sup> Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, 'O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. <sup>17</sup> If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace; and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. <sup>18</sup> But if not, be it

known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up.'

<sup>19</sup> Then Nebuchadnezzar was full of fury, and the expression of his face was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it was wont to be heated. <sup>20</sup> And he ordered certain mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace.....

<sup>24</sup> Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He said to his counselors, 'Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?' They answered the king, 'True, O king.' <sup>25</sup> He answered, 'But I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.'...<sup>28</sup> Nebuchadnezzar said, 'Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set at naught the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God.'

## Reflection

**TODAY'S** reading from the Book of Daniel is a tale of derring-do – that wonderful phrase from Chaucer. Our three heroes defy the King of Babylon, during the Exile in Babylon, and follow their leader, Daniel, in refusing to bow down to idols. They are cast into a 'burning, fiery furnace', heated to seven times its normal heat, and, unscathed, they are joined by a fourth in the flames – one 'like a son of the gods'. The Story of the Three Young Men is one of the Old Testament incidents which -, story-telling rather than historical record, show God's love and protection for his Holy Ones and thus prefigure Christ. We are reminded of that psalm verse (16:10) - 'thou didst not suffer thy holy one to see corruption' - which in Handel's Messiah speaks of God the Father's preservation of his Son.

There is particular relevance of the burning, fiery furnace to our present difficulties, as we have lived through what feels like a disaster movie. God cares for, and ultimately preserves, those who place their trust in him, but, in our present circumstances, many face illness and death. In other parts of the world, many also face grave deprivation, disease, and starvation. The New Testament scholar, Tom Wright, in *Time* magazine, reminded us that Christianity has nothing to say to help us understand plague and pestilence. All we can do, as God's people, as history teaches us, is join in lamentation. The Holy Father said something similar in *Urbi et Orbi* in St

Peter's Square last year, when he stood alone, like Moses or Elijah, and argued with God.

## Thursday in the Fifth Week of Lent

### Reading

*John 8:51-59 (RSV)*

*Abraham rejoiced that he would see Jesus' Day*

Jesus said to the Jews: <sup>51</sup> 'Truly, truly, I say to you, if any one keeps my word, he will never see death.' <sup>52</sup> The Jews said to him, 'Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, as did the prophets; and you say, 'If any one keeps my word, he will never taste death.' <sup>53</sup> Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you claim to be?' <sup>54</sup> Jesus answered, 'If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing; it is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say that he is your God. <sup>55</sup> But you have not known him; I know him. If I said, I do not know him, I should be a liar like you; but I do know him and I keep his word. <sup>56</sup> Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad.' <sup>57</sup> The Jews then said to him, 'You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?' <sup>58</sup> Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.' <sup>59</sup> So they took up stones to throw at him; but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple.

### Reflection

The bitterness of the conflict between Jesus and those whom St John refers to as 'the Jews' is best reframed as a conflict between Jesus and first century Jewish leaders. The claims of this rabbi, who is being seen by many to be 'the Messiah', God's Anointed One, don't match up to what the religious authorities expect or recognise. More than that, this new-fangled rabbi is using language about himself which can be explained only by himself being God. He talks of himself as being present at the time of Abraham and existing before Abraham – 'before Abraham was I am'. The conflict, as we know, would lead to Jesus being handed over to the Roman authorities, who crucified him as a political troublemaker. Some scholars think that what the conflict describes is more than the disagreement that happened between Jesus and a hostile audience. They think that what is being described is a bitter row in first century Judaism between the community which accepted Jesus and became known in due course (at

Antioch) as 'Christians' and those who remained traditional Jews, even after the sack of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in AD70.

## Friday in the Fifth Week of Lent

### Reading

*Jeremiah 20:10-13 (RSV)*

*The Lord is at my side, a mighty hero*

For I hear many whispering.

Terror is on every side!

"Denounce him! Let us denounce him!"

say all my familiar friends,  
watching for my fall.

"Perhaps he will be deceived,  
then we can overcome him,  
and take our revenge on him."

<sup>11</sup>But the LORD is with me as a dread warrior;  
therefore my persecutors will stumble,  
they will not overcome me.

They will be greatly shamed,  
for they will not succeed.

Their eternal dishonour  
will never be forgotten.

<sup>12</sup>O LORD of hosts, who try the righteous,  
who see the heart and the mind,  
let me see your vengeance upon them,  
for to you have I committed my cause.

<sup>13</sup>Sing to the LORD;  
praise the LORD!

For he has delivered the life of the needy  
from the hand of evildoers.

### Reflection

The prophecy of Jeremiah comes immediately before the downfall of Jerusalem in 597BC and his constant warnings about imminent destruction at the hands of the Babylonians fall on deaf ears. People want to hear a

prophet but only one who reassures them that all will be well. In today's passage, Jeremiah is alone and at the end of his tether but nonetheless places his trust in God. We can imagine justifiably some such passage – perhaps one learnt by memory – being said by Jesus during his Passion. He would not have said 'let me see your vengeance upon them', but he would have said 'for to you have I committed my cause.' In this passage, as we read it, we are not only looking at the Way of the Cross, which we shall follow next week, but entrusting our lives to God.

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