

FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY

13th -17th March 2023

Third Week of Lent

Collect for the Third Week of Lent

O GOD, author of every mercy and of all goodness, who in fasting, prayer and almsgiving have shown us a remedy for sin, look graciously on this confession of our lowliness, that we, who are bowed down by our conscience, may always be lifted up by your mercy. 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.

Monday in the Third Week of Lent

Reading

Luke 4:24-30 (RSV)

Like Elijah and Elisha, Jesus is not sent only to the Jews

Jesus [came to Nazareth and speaking to the people in the synagogue] said, 'Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his own country. ²⁵ But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Eli'jah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when there came a great famine over all the land; ²⁶ and Eli'jah was sent to none of them but only to Zar'ephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. ²⁷ And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Eli'sha; and none of them was cleansed, but only Na'aman the Syrian.' ²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. ²⁹ And they rose up and put him out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong. ³⁰ But passing through the midst of them he went away.

Reflection

In today's Gospel, Jesus explains that the Gospel is for a wider audience than his own people – the locals of Nazareth and Israel. As Simeon foretold at the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, the child is destined for the rise and fall of many in Israel. He is the Light to lighten the Gentiles as well as the glory of his own people. Jesus' homily enrages the synagogue congregation and they want to kill him. Interesting that Jesus makes his point about the prophet not being acceptable in his own country by referring to two old stories. One concerns the prophet Elijah who (1 Kings 17:14) ministers to a widow from near Sidon – not therefore an Israelite – and the other the prophet Elisha who in today's first reading (2 Kings 5:1-15) heals Naaman, a Syrian army commander, of leprosy.

These stories from the ninth century BC – the famine in Elijah's time and the problem of leprosy in the time of Elisha, on whom the mantle of Elijah fell – have an urgent modern relevance. Our problems, in this part of the world, don't include famine – whatever the queuing shopping trollies outside supermarkets suggest – but we are beset by the fear of disease. My guess is that many who become socially isolated at this time will join with the verses from Psalm 42 and 43, set as today's psalm.

Tuesday in the Third Week of Lent

Reading

Matthew 18:21-35 (RSV)

Forgiveness and the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

²¹ Peter came up and said to Jesus, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?' ²² Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven. ²³ Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents; ²⁵ and as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat he said, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and besought him, 'Have patience

with me, and I will pay you.’³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison till he should pay the debt.³¹ When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; ³³ and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’³⁴ And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt.³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.’

Reflection

TODAY’S Gospel follows on from a few verses about how, in the Early Church, someone who sins can be reconciled with the community. That reconciliation is a three-step procedure, involving, first, one-on-one reconciliation, then, if that does not work, reconciliation effected with the help of two or three witnesses, and finally the gathered Church community. If that fails, then exclusion follows. We are talking about personal relationships and estrangements and Peter, on behalf of the disciples, asks how often reconciliation has to be pursued. We are not sure whether the term he uses is the word here translated ‘seventy times seven’ is 490 or merely 77. Nor can we be sure about how much 10,000 talents is. The amount probably means what today we might refer to as a billion pounds, and, since we are talking about personal debts in this parable, the exact amount is not important. The lesser sum of one hundred denarii is more exact. It is the amount of money a labourer would earn in a hundred days, a denarius being, roughly, a day’s wage. So, a significant debt but not a breath-taking amount. Jesus is teaching his disciples to learn that reconciliation with each other ought to be manageable since the debt is so small compared with the forgiveness offered by our heavenly Father to us.

Wednesday in the Third Week of Lent

Reading

Deuteronomy 4:1-9 (RSV)

Take notice of the laws and observe them

Moses said to the people, ‘And now, O Israel, give heed to the statutes and the ordinances which I teach you, and do them; that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers,

gives you. ²You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it; that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you. ³Your eyes have seen what the LORD did at Ba'al-pe'or; for the LORD your God destroyed from among you all the men who followed the Ba'al of Pe'or; ⁴but you who held fast to the LORD your God are all alive this day. ⁵Behold, I have taught you statutes and ordinances, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land which you are entering to take possession of it. ⁶Keep them and do them; for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' ⁷For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? ⁸And what great nation is there, that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law which I set before you this day? ⁹'Only take heed, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children.

Reflection

Today's passage from Deuteronomy appears to suggest that those who perish are those who, like the Israelites who chased after foreign gods at Baal-peor. Apostasy brings death. This is a dangerous thought for us at a time of plague. In fact, the reading at Mass omits the difficult verses 2-4. Jesus himself deals with this question. In Luke 13:4 he has this to say:

Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Silo'am fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem?

He is clearly referring to a contemporary event, and speaking to disciples, troubled much as we are by the terrible events impacting on innocent men, women and children in Ukraine, not to mention young Russian conscripts.

What Moses is referring too principally is the link between Life and Fidelity. God is faithful to his promises and to those who love him. This teaching is further developed by Jesus in St John's Gospel, where he links abundant life with following him and abiding in his Love (John 15:9-10).

St Paul gives us a ringing reassurance of God's love in his letter to the Romans (8:37-39).

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Mother Julian of Norwich, the remarkable fourteenth century mystic, said the same thing in her *Revelations of Divine Love*:

**All shall be well, and all shall be well
and all manner of thing shall be well.**

Thursday in the Third Week of Lent

Reading

Luke 11;14-23 (RSV)

Jesus and Be-el'zebul

¹⁴ Now Jesus was casting out a demon that was dumb; when the demon had gone out, the dumb man spoke, and the people marvelled. **¹⁵** But some of them said, 'He casts out demons by Be-el'zebul, the prince of demons'; **¹⁶** while others, to test him, sought from him a sign from heaven. **¹⁷** But he, knowing their thoughts, said to them, 'Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and house falls upon house. **¹⁸** And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Be-el'zebul. **¹⁹** And if I cast out demons by Be-el'zebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges. **²⁰** But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. **²¹** When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are in peace; **²²** but when one stronger than he assails him and overcomes him, he takes away his armour in which he trusted, and divides his spoil. **²³** He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.

Reflection

THE SETTING for the Gospel is Jesus' teaching his disciples about prayer. He then casts out a mute – that is, a deaf and dumb demon and the deaf and dumb person spoke. Two groups of onlookers commented: one

commented that he was casting out demons by Beelzebul, the name of a Canaanite god used as a synonym for Satan; the other tested him by asking for a sign from heaven. We learn from this encounter how the kingdom of God is structured. The work of the Gospel is not through coercion but through the patient work of healing and exorcism. The strong man in the sayings has a palace and is heavily armed. If he is vigilant, everything seems safe. But there is a yet stronger one – Jesus is mightier than Satan – and we need to take sides. Jesus tells us that none who play their part in working for the common good are on the side of evil. Yet whoever does not congregate with Jesus is against him. One of the reasons we come together to worship is to congregate with Jesus as well as each other and thereby actively to choose to belong to him.

Friday in the Third Week of Lent

Reading

Mark 12:28-34 (RSV)

The Two Great Commandments

²⁸ One of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' ²⁹ Jesus answered, 'The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰ and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' ³¹ The Third is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.' ³² And the scribe said to him, 'You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that he is one, and there is no other but he; ³³ and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbour as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.' ³⁴ And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' And after that no one dared to ask him any question.

Reflection

It's hard to keep our practice of the Faith in balance. We know that we are to love God – say our prayers, obey his will – and we know that we have a

duty towards our neighbour – caring for others and their well-being. Yet it is easy for us, in a cocoon of holiness, to ignore the needs of others. It is easy too to do everything we can think of for others and forget the love of God and the importance of prayer as the resource for all we do. At this time, when we seek to protect our families and friends, we can also build our own cocoon, and not see too far beyond. We face the twin challenge: how to be sustained in our spiritual lives without the comfort of corporate worship and the sacraments, and how truly to serve others, especially those beyond our 'social isolation'. I say this not to criticise anyone: the real devotion of our communities and their willingness to look after one another is a real inspiration to me and I am sure to you too. May people know and see the love of God and his blessings at this time.