

FIRST READING: Isaiah 1:10, 16-20

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah:

Hear the word of the LORD, princes of Sodom! Listen to the instruction of our God, people of Gomorrah! Wash yourselves clean! Put away your misdeeds from before my eyes; cease doing evil; learn to do good. Make justice your aim: redress the wronged, hear the orphan's plea, defend the widow. Come now, let us set things right, says the LORD: Though your sins be like scarlet, they may become white as snow; Though they be crimson red, they may become white as wool. If you are willing, and obey, you shall eat the good things of the land; But if you refuse and resist, the sword shall consume you: for the mouth of the LORD has spoken!

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 50:8-9, 16bc-17, 21 and 23

To the upright I will show the saving power of God.

“Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you, for your burnt offerings are before me always. I take from your house no bullock, no goats out of your fold.”

To the upright I will show the saving power of God.

“Why do you recite my statutes, and profess my covenant with your mouth, Though you hate discipline and cast my words behind you?”

To the upright I will show the saving power of God.

“When you do these things, shall I be deaf to it? Or do you think that I am like yourself? I will correct you by drawing them up before your eyes. He that offers praise as a sacrifice glorifies me; and to him that goes the right way I will show the salvation of God.”

To the upright I will show the saving power of God.

GOSPEL: Matthew 23:1-12

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew:

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

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 2nd Tuesday of Lent

Taken from Isaiah's initial chapter, the prophet addressed his readers as the condemned dead of Sodom and Gomorrah. I don't know about you, but "them's fightin words!" Since those people died millennia before Isaiah, has he just insulted us through the centuries? Maybe he's desperately trying to gain our attention to hear his message through a shock. It's always easier for us to pick out the failures, faults and foibles of others. We can assume his message is for those others who really need it. As each of us is a sinner, we really need it.

Wash yourselves clean, he said. Forgive our own sins? Is that what he's meant? No, then as now, God forgave and still forgives sins. He's saying the equivalency to "Get your act together and do better!" We seek God to forgive us and seek God's grace to change. Only by turning to God can we become the people that God wants us to be. God knows our need and potential for new life and better behavior. Isaiah has also framed what this new life will look like.

It's not enough to say more prayers and go to church more often. These are part of what God wants. Listen to the tone of today's Psalm. These things add nothing to our infinite, eternal and unconditional God. It's hubris to think that anything we can offer God will make God better. God created the cosmos, you and me. We don't create God in the least. What we think we offer to God, God, in fact, offers to us as the means of drawing us closer as God's beloved children. God seeks us and nothing more. We have come from God and, as we live, we are in the process of our return to God.

Our misdeeds and doing evil are directed in how we treat or mistreat one another. Learning to do good is doing good toward our neighbor. God's justice is always forgiveness. Redressing the wrongs that are all around us is, in part, complicated for before we can redress the wrongs of others we must address our own. We need forgiveness first. We need to forgive ourselves and others as part of God's process. Self righteousness is the stumbling block to God's justice, not a lack of faith.

To hear the orphan's plea and provide defense for the widow may be closer than we think. How do we treat those closest to us? We will have little effectiveness dealing alone with troubles far away. How do we show compassion, mercy and forgiveness to the people with whom we work? How about the people with whom we live? This puts Isaiah's challenge in the places where we live, work, play and pray. Yet, closer, how do we approach and deal with our selves? Do we have compassion and mercy for ourselves? Can we forgive our own flaws, failures and sin? We'll never be able to treat people any better if we don't begin within.

However, mercy, compassion and forgiveness first come to us through the infinite, eternal and unconditional love of God. We will only be able to meet the challenge of Isaiah's message when we have accepted the gifts that God has given us in love; life, faith, family, others and forgiveness. It is only then when we can change and live new life. We will always fail and God is always with us to forgive. God transforms us in love.

God's forgiveness is not to make it so our sins have never happened. They did and cannot be undone. That's where Isaiah descriptive verse plays well. Red never becomes white. My favorite red shirt may become less vivid after ten years of washing but it never stops being red. Yet God transforms our sin into new life to try anew to live better. The prayer of the Exultet of the

Easter Vigil comes to mind. "O, happy fault; O, necessary sin of Adam!" If not for human sin, Jesus would never have been born. God would never have become a human being and showed, through Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection, the depth, power and extent of divine love. Sin can be a stepping stone for goodness; in God's forgiving love.

Jesus has given a similar message to the crowds, his disciples and us. Those nasty scribes and Pharisees; all those who have authority and wield the power of their positions; they need to hear this message. Wait a minute! They haven't read this gospel; how can they hear Jesus? They don't; we do. Jesus' message, as was Isaiah's, is for us. The greatest stumbling block to living a faithful life is never a lack of faith. We all believe and hopefully pray, "Help my unbelief!" The greatest stumbling block is self righteousness and to assume that Jesus was speaking to someone else. As Paul prayed for sinners, I add of whom I am the first.

How often am I a hypocrite? The origin of the word means actor, one who puts on a show or one who merely plays lip service to the gospel. How am I puffed up with self importance? How do I boss people around? Am I really deaf to other's needs? I also have titles like teacher and father. Yet, at the same time, I struggle to be faithful in service of Christ's brothers and sisters. I am human and therefore a sinner. It is only in God's grace that I can do so.

Humility is to know one's self and acknowledge one's failings and gifts. False humility is to deny one's gifts. The humbling that Jesus wants from us is to acknowledge our faults, failings and sins and accept the gift the God's grace imparts to us. Forgiveness is one of many. Part of the call to humility is gratefulness of those gifts. Gratefulness is one as well. God is our father. The Spirit is our teacher. Jesus is our brother. God is a thought away and never leaves us.

Today's messages from Isaiah and Jesus have an edge to them. They are framed in shocking addresses to us. To be called the dead of cursed cities and as insensitive potentates can insult us. Yet, in God's love, the purpose of the message is to save us in faith and live a new life as children of God. Forgiven in God's justice, we serve one another renewed.

May our actions toward others reflect God's life within us.

James D. Beath
March 15, 2022