

FIRST READING

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Daniel 3:25, 34-43

Azariah stood up in the fire and prayed aloud: "For your name's sake, O Lord, do not deliver us up forever, or make void your covenant. Do not take away your mercy from us, for the sake of Abraham, your beloved, Isaac your servant, and Israel your holy one, To whom you promised to multiply their offspring like the stars of heaven, or the sand on the shore of the sea. For we are reduced, O Lord, beyond any other nation, brought low everywhere in the world this day because of our sins. We have in our day no prince, prophet, or leader, no burnt offering, sacrifice, oblation, or incense, no place to offer first fruits, to find favor with you. But with contrite heart and humble spirit let us be received; As though it were burnt offerings of rams and bullocks, or thousands of fat lambs, So let our sacrifice be in your presence today as we follow you unreservedly; for those who trust in you cannot be put to shame. And now we follow you with our whole heart, we fear you and we pray to you. Do not let us be put to shame, but deal with us in your kindness and great mercy. Deliver us by your wonders, and bring glory to your name, O Lord."

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 25:4-5ab, 6 and 7bc, 8-9

Remember your mercies, O Lord.

Your ways, O LORD, make known to me; teach me your paths, Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my savior.

Remember your mercies, O Lord.

Remember that your compassion, O LORD, and your kindness are from of old. In your kindness remember me, because of your goodness, O LORD.

Remember your mercies, O Lord.

Good and upright is the LORD; thus he shows sinners the way. He guides the humble to justice, he teaches the humble his way.

Remember your mercies, O Lord.

GOSPEL: Matthew 18:21-35

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew:

Peter approached Jesus and asked him, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus answered, "I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times. That is why the Kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the accounting, a debtor was brought before him who owed him a huge amount. Since he had no way of paying it back, his master ordered him to be sold, along with his wife, his children, and all his property, in payment of the debt. At that, the servant fell down, did him homage, and said, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.' Moved with compassion the master of that servant let him go and

forgave him the loan. When that servant had left, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a much smaller amount. He seized him and started to choke him, demanding, 'Pay back what you owe.' Falling to his knees, his fellow servant begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he had him put in prison until he paid back the debt. Now when his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were deeply disturbed, and went to their master and reported the whole affair. His master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to. Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?' Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt. So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 3rd Tuesday of Lent

For what did Azariah pray? He and his confreres were in a very bad situation; in the fires of a furnace. They should have been dead already, such was their peril. "Deliver us by your wonders," did Azariah pray. What does deliver mean? I looked it up; the internet can be amazing. To assist in the birth of a baby. To hand over a parcel or letter. To connect one's fist to another's face. To provide something promised. To rescue and set free. We pray in the prayer that Jesus taught us, "Deliver us from evil." Does this mean remove evil from us, transform our sins or bring us to the good? We pray the word so often, deliver us to what?

I always shy away from the special effects in scripture. They are red herrings because they can be the focus of our attention to the point that we miss the point of scripture. God seeks to save us. We still commit sins and all of us will die. How did Jesus save us from those evils? They are still realities that we face. Azariah and his buddies may have been saved from being roasted to a crisp but they no longer walk among us live people.

Azariah listed what he and his fellow Jews had lost; country, temple, king and homeland. They were in exile and had nowhere to offer God what they didn't have. Perhaps they needed nothing more to offer God but themselves. Perhaps the point of this passage is simply about the relationship between Azariah, his companions and God. They knew God's presence amid certain death. Could the peril they faced have been God's gift? They knew God within it; sought, praised and thanked God all at once in the white-hot furnace.

What's the lesson to us? Our troubles change; they never really go away. We are always our own worst enemy by our choices and actions. Perhaps God has never intended for us to change, completely. Each of us has come to life as a human being by the grace or gift of God. We know love, faith, fear, anger, hate, despair and troubles, too, as we live. If Paul was right and everything is a grace and gift of God, can we not know God within all our experience. God's gift of faith can only transform us and not our situation. When we pray, "Deliver us from evil," we also pray at the same time, "Deliver us to God." God is only a thought away and never leaves us alone.

Remember your mercies, O Lord. What are God's mercies? God's personal favors? God is all mercy. Aren't we, then, God's mercies? God made us. God gave us life, faith, hope and love.

Through faith, God has offered us salvation through the forgiveness of sin, our sin. Through faith God has promised us the Kingdom of God and our eternal life within it. Who is it who remembers? God is the eternal now and has no past to remember. God knows us from eternity. We remember. The mystery of faith: Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again. God binds us, through Jesus, to God. God binds us to Glory.

This gospel can be scary. None of us has perfect forgiveness. How many of us hold grudges for many years, if not a lifetime? We want God to hold those who hurt us responsible for their actions. But, aren't there people whom we have treated poorly? Why wouldn't God listen to them? Each human being is a beloved child of God. Will God hold us responsible for our deeds? It sounds from this story that eternal doom and punishment will await us. This, however, is not the intention of this story. The gospel is not bad news. Its very name means good news. Jesus has just told us a parable here. The purpose of which is to get us to take pause and listen, reflect and question. To seek God is to seek meaning in what seems meaningless and to seek God's presence where we feel none exists. Jesus turned his execution as a criminal into his resurrection and our sin into eternal life. In his story we, who have our limits seek God who is love; infinite, eternal and unconditional. We will always fail in the face of God who will not fail us.

We can pray, "Deliver us from our sin, our pain, our troubles and our limits." It is better to pray, "Deliver us into your loving arms." For this is what we truly mean. God transforms us not our situations. God gives us what we need to live, love and believe. We are all on a journey back to God from whom we have life.

May our way be blessed as we know our Lord.

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