

Readings for the 2nd Thursday of Easter

FIRST READING: Acts of the Apostles 5:27-33

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles:

When the court officers had brought the Apostles in and made them stand before the Sanhedrin, the high priest questioned them, "We gave you strict orders did we not, to stop teaching in that name. Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and want to bring this man's blood upon us." But Peter and the Apostles said in reply, "We must obey God rather than men. The God of our ancestors raised Jesus, though you had him killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as leader and savior to grant Israel repentance and forgiveness of sins. We are witnesses of these things, as is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him." When they heard this, they became infuriated and wanted to put them to death.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 34:2 and 9, 17-18, 19-20

The Lord hears the cry of the poor.

I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall be ever in my mouth. Taste and see how good the LORD is; blessed the man who takes refuge in him.

The Lord hears the cry of the poor.

The LORD confronts the evildoers, to destroy remembrance of them from the earth. When the just cry out, the LORD hears them, and from all their distress he rescues them.

The Lord hears the cry of the poor.

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; and those who are crushed in spirit he saves. Many are the troubles of the just man, but out of them all the LORD delivers him.

The Lord hears the cry of the poor.

GOSPEL: John 3:31-36

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John:

The one who comes from above is above all. The one who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of earthly things. But the one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. Whoever does accept his testimony certifies that God is trustworthy. For the one whom God sent speaks the words of God. He does not ration his gift of the Spirit. The Father loves the Son and has given everything over to him. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God remains upon him.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 2nd Thursday of Easter

Today's first reading from Acts will be the first reading for this coming Sunday. I hate it when this happens. There is a difference, they have some different verses. They omit, on Sunday, the verse containing the Sanhedrin's threat of death and add the verse of the disciple's joy. I don't want to give today what I will give on Sunday, so I will reflect on a theme that I will not cover for the weekend.

How do we know what God wants? How do we know God's will to which we can be obedient? This is a profound moral, ethical, theological and spiritual question. Given this context, the believers chose civil and religious disobedience to preach the risen Lord. They were willing to risk the threat of death. Is the lesson for us? Are we to be willing to suffer and die for our faith? The message has a context; God's love for us. Without the love of God as reflected in our love for others and for ourselves, such a choice is, as Paul has said, and empty action; for nothing.

Some years ago, I spoke to someone who would protest, weekly and vociferously, outside a local abortion clinic. This person did so for several years. Then, upon daily reading of scriptures came upon four passages. Matthew 5:39, "But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other one to him as well." Matthew 7:1-2, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; because the judgments you give are the judgments you will get, and the standard you use will be the standard used for you." 1 Corinthians 13:3, "Though I should give away to the poor all that I possess, and even give up my body to be burned, if I am without love, it will do me no good whatever." 1 Timothy 1:15, "Here is a saying that you can rely on and nobody should doubt: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. I myself am the greatest of them." Upon reading and praying these passages, the person began to question the weight of outrage, anger, frustration and judgment they carried. Was this what God wanted?

The interactions, of the protest, were directed at people, fellow sinners and not the law. The person's operative question was, "How can I change sinners?" The answer became, "Only God can, by God's grace and out of God's infinite, eternal and unconditional love, compassion and mercy." The person, whose mission had been so clear and God's will so strong, discovered that discernment of them needed more prayer and reflection on God's Word. Discerning God's will has to be rooted in the Good News of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. The Holy Spirit led the person to ask a new question, "How do I hate the sin while loving the sinner?"

Instead of changing the people who worked at and went to the abortion clinic, the Spirit graced this individual with a profound change. "How can I love these people, fellow sinners, as God loves me, the greatest sinner of all?" Jesus died to save all humanity from sin and death. He did it once and for all, but not all at once. Faith and salvation come to people one at a time. It doesn't happen first to other people or "them," it happens first with you and me and in God's own time and way. This is what the disciples and the Holy Spirit witnessed and to which they gave witness, the Good News of Jesus.

All week, so far, we have been reading the third chapter of John's gospel. Today we continue to read it. This is Jesus' visit and teaching to Nicodemus, whose name means the people's victory. Yesterday was the most famous quote from chapter three, verse sixteen, "God so loved the

world that he gave his only-begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.” Jesus revealed that he is God’s son, given to the world in love. This is why Jesus is worthy of obedience. As being fully human, Jesus is also fully God.

I always like to add that the gospels, compiled and written years after their events, reflect the faith and experience of the post Easter and post Pentecost Church, to which we now belong. Jesus’ identity is part of our living fabric of faith and as familiar as the sound of a loved one’s voice. How hard were Jesus words for Nicodemus to hear, digest and incorporate into his Jewish faith as a religious elder of the community? He came to Jesus at night and in secret so no one would know. Jesus must have moved and changed him for he was the one who found Jesus a tomb in which to be buried. As a preacher, I can envy Jesus’ success, tempered by the fact that Jesus had an unfair advantage. He was God. That’s a perk, thank God, I don’t have. My experience is the same as Nicky’s; I need God’s grace too.

Discernment and faith are definitely gifts of God, but we don’t receive them all at once. We receive them in an on-going process that lasts a lifetime. In prayer, scripture, reflection and experience, God always has something new for us as we grow closer to God until the day we receive the fullness of life in Christ, forever.

May God continue to surprise us and give us the grace to accept surprises.

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