

FIRST READING: Ezekiel 36:23-28

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel:

Thus says the LORD: I will prove the holiness of my great name, profaned among the nations, in whose midst you have profaned it. Thus the nations shall know that I am the LORD, says the Lord GOD, when in their sight I prove my holiness through you. For I will take you away from among the nations, gather you from all the foreign lands, and bring you back to your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you to cleanse you from all your impurities, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you, taking from your bodies your stony hearts and giving you natural hearts. I will put my spirit within you and make you live by my statutes, careful to observe my decrees. You shall live in the land I gave your ancestors; you shall be my people, and I will be your God. The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 51:12-13, 14-15, 18-19

***I will pour clean water on you and wash away all your sins.***

A clean heart create for me, O God, and a steadfast spirit renew within me. Cast me not out from your presence, and your Holy Spirit take not from me.

***I will pour clean water on you and wash away all your sins.***

Give me back the joy of your salvation, and a willing spirit sustain in me. I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners shall return to you.

***I will pour clean water on you and wash away all your sins.***

For you are not pleased with sacrifices; should I offer a burnt offering, you would not accept it. My sacrifice, O God, is a contrite spirit; a heart contrite and humbled, O God, you will not spurn.

***I will pour clean water on you and wash away all your sins.***

Gospel: Matthew 22:1-14

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew:

Jesus again in reply spoke to the chief priests and the elders of the people in parables saying, "The Kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. He dispatched his servants to summon the invited guests to the feast, but they refused to come. A second time he sent other servants, saying, 'Tell those invited: "Behold, I have prepared my banquet, my calves and fattened cattle are killed, and everything is ready; come to the feast.'" Some ignored the invitation and went away, one to his farm, another to his business. The rest laid hold of his servants, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged and sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then the king said to his servants, 'The feast is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy to come. Go out, therefore, into the main roads and invite to the feast whomever you find.' The servants went out into the streets and gathered all they found, bad and good alike, and the hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to meet the guests he saw a man there not dressed in a wedding garment. He said to him, 'My friend, how is it that you came in here without a wedding garment?' But he was reduced to silence. Then the king said to his attendants, 'Bind his hands and feet, and cast him into the darkness outside, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.' Many are invited, but few are chosen."

The Gospel of the Lord.

## Reflection for the 20<sup>th</sup> Thursday of the Year

Ezekiel, this morning, opened with God saying that God will prove that God is holy. Have the nations, after all these centuries, come to know that God is the Lord? Today there are many Christians, Jews and Muslims who know God. But as of yet, not all people know the Lord God. What has Ezekiel really offered us? Those who believe know that God, the Lord is holy. What is "holy?" God is holy. To know God's presence, and God is but a thought away, is to experience holiness. We believe that God lives through, with, in and among God's people. That also includes people who do not yet believe in God. Each of us, every single human being, is created in the image and likeness of God; believer or not.

In each person, we can glimpse God and thus know God's holiness. Ezekiel's prophecy may not yet be fulfilled, but for us believers it is. We have the opportunity to seek and find God's presence in everyone we meet and in every one of our experiences. All it takes is a mere thought to glimpse God. We can live, in God's grace, intentionally seeking the presence of God that is all around us in the wonder of all creation, other people or ourselves. Ezekiel's words were not just to give hope to Jews in Diaspora, but for us right now. We, now, grieve the loss of our three parishes and find ourselves in the midst of people we don't know and in places that are unfamiliar.

To remember that God is part of each of us and in each other is a major step to discover the new Christian Community that will build our new parish. The hope of Jerusalem's restoration for those in Diaspora is also our hope of restoration as we, in faith, build our new parish community in Christ. We find Jesus, our savior, Messiah and Son of God, in our midst each time we gather for mass and receive him in communion. In these actions we become the Mystical Body of Christ and bring Jesus, through our living witness into a waiting world.

One thing to note, listen to Ezekiel's language. It's all about what God will do. How does God do it? God changes the hearts of God's people. God loves those to whom God gave life. God forgives when God's people fail. A new heart leads to a new way to live and experience life. Only a remnant of Jews returned to Jerusalem. The majority remained in the places where they were born, praying, worshiping, and living their faith amid unbelieving people. Today Judaism is a living, thriving and faithful people who give witness to their faith in God. What is their Promised Land? It's not a place or nation. It is the indwelling life of God within and among them. This is the same for us. Our promised parish is where we gather together.

The gospel of Matthew tells a horribly bloody story. Some of the king's servants and courtiers get murdered. The King, in retaliation, then destroyed the town and slaughtered the inhabitants who murdered the king's people. Some poor homeless man got invited to a wedding and didn't have the proper clothes and got hog-tied and thrown out into the dark, cold night. What gives? Is the gospel really bad and not good news? This is a parable of Jesus, a story that has a context. Jesus' parables are never straight forward. He's told us that it's like the Kingdom of God and not the Kingdom's reality.

It is intended to make us experience disquiet. The story is designed to make us wonder about what it means. To understand we must pause and ponder. We need to spend time with Jesus and his words. Matthew was compiled and written as early as the year 40 and as late as the year 80. Persecution of Christians began during the time of Saul, who became Paul. In the Acts of the Apostles we witnessed the death of Stephen with Saul as a witness. In the year 70, the Romans destroyed the city of Jerusalem and its temple. The inhabitants were not slaughtered but taken as captives who, as slaves, built the coliseum in Rome. Some scholars think that Jesus has predicted these historical events in his words. Only a few Jews believed in Jesus. The majority rejected him and his followers and remained faithful to the faith of Abraham. Some, most notably Saul persecuted the early believers. Jerusalem was destroyed.

This story is about an invitation to a wedding feast. Just receiving the invitation was not enough. The entire first round of invitations was completely ignored and some ignored with violence. The second round of invites filled the hall. But here the invitation alone was ineffective for but one man. Today we baptize babies and can miss the meaning here. In the early Church, mostly adults got baptized after a

lengthy formation period. Babies may have been baptized as part of the households of the newly baptized.

Back in the 1970s, the Church renewed the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults. I have been a part of this process with people seeking faith and membership within the Catholic Church for most of my priesthood. For the most part, people who join the program join the Catholic Church by Baptism or a Profession of Faith, having been baptized in another Christian Church. People can only be baptized once. But on very rare occasions, people have postponed or canceled their initiation. I have witnessed this twice in the more than forty years of ministry. One, to my knowledge, was never baptized. The other needed more time for discernment and continued to Baptism the following year.

I believe that the man not properly dressed could be a person who was not ready. Or worse, sort of a wolf in sheep's clothing who could have potentially betrayed the Christian Community for persecution. To read the Acts of the Apostles' conversion of Saul to Paul, we can find such wariness. He met just with the elders and not the entire community, upon receiving his mission to the gentiles. They sent him far away from them and Jerusalem too. There was a lengthy period of formation in which the community could observe the candidates to discern if their faith was in deed real. Only when candidate and community was certain could the candidate be baptized and join the Church of Christ. I believe that Jesus' parable referred to one of these scenarios.

What of us? How do we respond to God's invitation? Each day we have is God's invitation for us to join more closely in a relationship with one another and in God. Do we actively seek the presence of Jesus as we gather together in his name? Jesus has promised us that he is among us. Do we know him as we break bread and receive him in communion? Do we then bring Jesus' presence into a waiting world when we leave church? These are the challenges that Jesus has offered to us in his invitation to gather as one and become his Mystical Body on Earth. How can we respond?

May we gather as one in Jesus' name.

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