

FIRST READING: Isaiah 43:16-21

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah:

Thus says the LORD, who opens a way in the sea and a path in the mighty waters, who leads out chariots and horsemen, a powerful army, till they lie prostrate together, never to rise, snuffed out and quenched like a wick. Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; see, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? In the desert I make a way, in the wasteland, rivers. Wild beasts honor me, jackals and ostriches, for I put water in the desert and rivers in the wasteland for my chosen people to drink, the people whom I formed for myself, that they might announce my praise.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 126:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6.

The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.

When the LORD brought back the captives of Zion, we were like men dreaming. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with rejoicing.

The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.

Then they said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad indeed.

The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.

Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the torrents in the southern desert. Those that sow in tears shall reap rejoicing.

The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.

Although they go forth weeping, carrying the seed to be sown, They shall come back rejoicing, carrying their sheaves.

The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.

SECOND READING: Philippians 3:8-14

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Philippians:

Brothers and sisters: I consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found

in him, not having any righteousness of my own based on the law but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God, depending on faith to know him and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by being conformed to his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. It is not that I have already taken hold of it or have already attained perfect maturity, but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it, since I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ Jesus. Brothers and sisters, I for my part do not consider myself to have taken possession. Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: John 8:1-11

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John:

Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. But early in the morning he arrived again in the temple area, and all the people started coming to him, and he sat down and taught them. Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and made her stand in the middle. They said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they could have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger. But when they continued asking him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he bent down and wrote on the ground. And in response, they went away one by one, beginning with the elders. So he was left alone with the woman before him. Then Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She replied, "No one, sir." Then Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin any more."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 5th Sunday of Lent

Isaiah began today's passage by recalling the Exodus of Israel from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. I wonder why? Because just after his recollection, he told his readers to forget about it, "Remember not the things of the past." Then he embarked upon a description of what God will do that is new. God will

transform the desert into a paradise. Why? So people may announce God's praise. Which desert will God terra-form?

This passage is from what we call second Isaiah. His prophecies are about God restoring God's people with the promise to return them to the Promised Land. However, Palestine is still a hot and dry place. Only a remnant of those in Diaspora ever returned to repopulate and rebuild Jerusalem. What of the majority of God's people who remained in Diaspora? Their faith continued to this day. The heart of this promise is the restoration of the human spirit; something we all need.

Isaiah has also told people that God will not remember their sins as well. This passage is also about God's love, mercy and forgiveness. The new thing that God will do is to forgive sin. Part of God's mystery is that God is not rooted in time as we are. God lives now, always and forever. The name God gave to Moses for God is, "I Am." God lives within, through and among God's people and will never leave them even as they live in the places far away from Jerusalem. People may praise God wherever they live. This was true in Isaiah's time as it is now. God made God's people new as God makes us new.

Paul had a life changing experience when he came to faith in Jesus. He had always been a man of profound faith even before his conversion to Christ. So much so that he tried to crush the nascent Christian Church. He acted as a hit-man and bounty hunter all in the name of God. This is what he called "so much rubbish." He could not just walk away from his past deeds. He, as we, remembered them and carried them for the rest of his life. Jesus forgave Paul once and for all; all his sins. Paul believed in Jesus and knew God's forgiveness.

Paul knew that he belonged to Christ. For the rest of his life, Paul would strive to know him. He was on a journey to encounter Jesus fully. It began when Paul first believed. His reflections in Philippians reflect the prayer of the father of the possessed son in the gospel, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief." Paul's journey to Jesus ended with Paul's death. Paul's new life in Christ is now eternal as we all await the Kingdom of God. Our journey to Jesus still continues in faith.

Today's gospel begs a question. Since, by nature, adultery takes two, where's the woman's lover? Why is she the only one to be dragged into the street for public humiliation and death? Jesus faced this woman as an intractable test. On the one hand, the Roman occupiers had banned all religious executions. To stone this woman to death would be a felony. Remember the acts of the Sanhedrin. They had to have Jesus condemned to death by the Romans since they had no authority to put a man to death. On the other hand, if Jesus were to comply with

Roman law, he would violate Mosaic Law thus making him a heretic. The Pharisees thought, "Checkmate!"

However, Jesus said nothing and did nothing except doodle in the dirt. All he said was, "Let the one among you without sin cast the first stone." The irony of this, which we know and they did not, is that only Jesus was the one without sin. He did nothing. He didn't even look at the woman until the two of them were alone. He averted his eyes from her as to save her from more shame. The rest of the crowd wanted either her or Jesus' blood. It would be Jesus' blood that would save us all. We want to know what Jesus wrote. Did he list the sins of each member of the crowd? It was his silence that spoke to the crowd. Each person knew themselves to be a sinner. I picture this scene as a speaker quiets a group with standing in silence. Each one of them had a guilty conscience; and so do we.

So, did she get away with her sin in the end? No, she was not condemned to death. She had been publically shamed by all but Jesus. In saying, "Go and sin no more," Jesus forgave her. The crowd judged her as deserving death. To them she was a whore or at least a slut. To Jesus she was a fellow human. He offered her compassion and mercy. He offered her life and a second chance. God's forgiveness offers us this too.

Through Isaiah, God promised us something new. Paul found new life in Jesus as he came to faith. Jesus forgave the woman. He saved her from certain death with a second chance. What of us? Where can we find forgiveness and new life? We encounter Jesus as we gather together for the breaking of bread, here at mass.

May Jesus continue to lead, guide and forgive us.

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April 2-3, 2022