

Readings for the 1st Tuesday of Lent

FIRST READING: Isaiah 55:10-11

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah:

Thus says the LORD: Just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down And do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, Giving seed to the one who sows and bread to the one who eats, So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; It shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 34:4-5, 6-7, 16-17, 18-19

From all their distress God rescues the just.

Glorify the LORD with me, let us together extol his name. I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears.

From all their distress God rescues the just.

Look to him that you may be radiant with joy, and your faces may not blush with shame. When the poor one called out, the LORD heard, and from all his distress he saved him.

From all their distress God rescues the just.

The LORD has eyes for the just, and ears for their cry. The LORD confronts the evildoers, to destroy remembrance of them from the earth.

From all their distress God rescues the just.

When the just cry out, the LORD hears them, and from all their distress he rescues them. The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; and those who are crushed in spirit he saves.

From all their distress God rescues the just.

GOSPEL: Matthew 6:7-15

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew:

Jesus said to his disciples: "In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them. Your Father knows what you need before you ask him. "This is how you are to pray: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. "If you forgive men their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 1st Tuesday of Lent

The bishops, in their wisdom, altered the translation of today's gospel. They inserted the words of the Our Father as we memorized it. This poses a problem. I have a hard time to focus on the words and meaning of the prayer I rattle off by rote. The actual translation makes the process of hearing, understanding and praying as Jesus taught just a bit easier. I include it here.

GOSPEL: Matthew 6:7-15

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew:

Jesus said to his disciples: "In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them. Your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This is how you are to pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and do not subject us to the final test, but deliver us from the evil one." If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Isaiah began, in today's reading, with a fairly accurate telling of the process of precipitation and its role to water the world. When he spoke of rain and snow coming from the heavens, he meant the sky. It returns to the heavens through evaporation. He has described a natural process. From a perspective of faith, precipitation is also God sent. God has created this natural process to keep the earth alive. He has described a concrete, real process of life as it exists in this world and in our lives.

He used it to describe God's Word and the Word's working. We read this passage with faith in Jesus. We believe him, as God's son, Messiah and God, to be God's pre-existent Word that created the cosmos and saved humanity from sin and death. This colors our understanding of this passage. Jesus saved us by his death on the cross through the forgiveness of our sins. Jesus has accomplished this two millennia ago. Yet, the process will not be complete until Jesus returns to finalize God's Kingdom. We have heard God's Word in Jesus.

There is an older tradition in Judaism that we share. God's Word is also the text of the scriptures; the actual words, narrative, poetry and prophecy of the bible. This is the original context of Isaiah's words. This one has a different impact. Within Judaism, the Messiah has not yet come. God's word in scriptures continues to affect people's lives. The transformation for Jews and Christians is an on going process and will not return to God until all humanity is ready to return. For those of the Judeo-Christian heritage this is a prophecy still being fulfilled and will not be over until the Messiah returns. For us it is in the Kingdom of God. Yet for both Christians and Jews the process has begun.

God's Word transforms the community and also transforms each individual. The scriptures we read at mass for all to hear. So do the Jews at worship in the synagogue. We also read the scriptures on our own, hopefully, at home. The community needs transformation through the Word of scripture, but even more powerful can be the way the bible can impact our own individual lives. I spend a lot of my time reading, praying and studying the written Word of God. I may have read these particular passages many times. Yet, each time I read them, their impact is new. The insight and meaning I find fits the needs I have and they are always different and changing. The transforming Word of God has and is a living reality.

The term “the just” is a common one in the bible. Who are they? From our Christian perspective no one but Jesus is just. Each of us, as a human being, is a sinner and by that description in need of justice. For Jews, it is a term for one who is faithful to God and striving to carry out God’s commandments. From this interpretation, a sinner who is faithful is included among the just. What is God’s justice?

We had a prayer before the bishops, in their wisdom, changed the prayers for mass in a way that obscured their meaning and purpose. Prayers are never for God’s benefit. Prayers are for ours. God already knows us more intimately than we can know ourselves. God knows our thoughts, feelings, aspirations and sin. God has no use for our words; God already knows them. As we pray and express them, God becomes more real and present to us. Prayer is the way that God draws us closer into a relationship with God. Worship, as public, communal prayer, draws the community closer together in Christ. God has offered prayer to us.

Lord, I am not worthy to receive you. Only say the Word and I shall be healed. For us, for justice, we punish those who break the law. We expect punishment for our sin. For God, justice is always forgiveness. We find this notion contrary to common sense. It is our common sense and not God’s. God seeks to forgive sinners, of whom I am foremost. We find it difficult to forgive. We hold grudges and seek the destruction of evil-doers. God seeks to forgive us from our sin. Through forgiveness, God makes evildoers the just. St. Paul coined the term “justification by faith alone.” All we need is faith in God and in the one God sent, Jesus to receive God’s gift of salvation by the forgiveness of our sins. We, by faith, are justified; forgiven. God is just a thought away.

Jesus has taught the apostles to pray with his own prayer, the Our Father. I learned this prayer as a toddler and can rattle it off mindlessly. I also learned it in Latin as an older boy. In high school I learned it in Spanish. In grad school I learned it in New Testament Greek. I can think, feel and pray only in English. So rattling the prayer is my common experience. In English I can slow down and consciously listen to the words Jesus has taught. In it I do not petition God to do anything but to transform me in God’s will. The prayer acknowledges my need for God alone. The transformation God offers is to forgive each other as God has forgiven you and me.

Jesus’ mission was to give his life as ransom for human sin and death. His mission has at its heart the forgiveness of human sin, collectively and individually. Jesus died to save the entire human race, of which there is only one. Jesus also died for you and me. Jesus had each person, his beloved brothers and sisters in mind as he died in sacrifice. He died for all the sins we have committed, the sins we commit now and all the sins we will commit up until the moment we die. This is the gift of God’s justice that Jesus has won for us once and for all.

This powerful gift that Jesus has given us, he asks us to share with one another. When we find it difficult to forgive another, sometimes we show that we have no idea of what forgiveness really is. We are too bogged down with our notion of punitive justice. Jesus’ forgiving justice is healing instead. As kids, we experienced forgiveness as a get-out-of-jail-free card. It resulted in us avoiding the sanctions that always accompanied our bad behavior; being grounded, spending time in jug or sent to our room. As an adult it’s getting a ticket for some traffic infraction. God, who is infinite, eternal and unconditional love, operates out of an unlimited amount of patience, compassion and mercy.

What happens when we forgive someone else? We don't just let them off the hook. Both parties are in pain, or at least the aggrieved party. The process of forgiveness releases one from carrying the pain. I no longer need to hold on to my outrage and anger toward another. In letting go of the hurt I can move on. When we can say, "I'm sorry" and "I forgive you" can healing be possible. Yes, it takes and effort. It's not easy to let go of outrage and a bruised ego. I know this and so do you. But consider what the alternative can be. Revenge; and revenge proves that I'm more of a jackass than the other person. Revenge is self perpetuating. Forgiveness, as a gift, will keep giving.

When we find it impossible to forgive, God will forgive us. Eventually, since God's grace is always sufficient for salvation, we can try again. God will forgive us until the day we can share God's gift to forgive those who don't deserve it. My single sobering thought is this: I don't deserve God's forgiveness either. Yet, all I have to do is ask and God will forgive. Jesus, as being fully human as I am knows how difficult it is to forgive. Remember who he forgave, "Forgive them for they know not what they do!" These were some of his last words before he died; for each human being.

We pray to do God's will and to be the ones to strive for God's Kingdom. We are not worthy of the task; but we believe. Our faith makes the difference. It is God who works within and through us. God shapes us into the people he knows we can become. God's grace will give us nourishment for the journey as forgiveness when we fail.

May God's Word keep the world watered through us.

James D. Beath
March 8, 2022