



SUNDAY REFLECTION

A theme of today's readings is new life. It is the time of year to speak of new life, especially in the Northern Hemisphere where all around us nature is bursting with newness, it is also a Lenten theme as we are called to return to the Lord out of our sinfulness. We come to God 'out of the depths', accepting all our daily dyings and the hope of life coming back again. Linked with the theme of new life in the readings is that of the Spirit. Talk of the spirit in the Liturgy is usually confined to Pentecost and Confirmation, but the mention of the Spirit in both the First and Second Readings makes it an appropriate theme for this Sunday of Lent.

While the raising of Lazarus from death to life is the main focus of the Gospel, it could be instructive also to dwell on the other relationships with Jesus portrayed there. The disciples are fearful at first and in their dialogue with Jesus try to dissuade Him from going to Bethany but are eventually persuaded by His single-mindedness. The two sisters, of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, portray the same characteristics they have elsewhere in the Gospels: Martha assertive and Mary retiring. Martha is not afraid to rebuke Jesus for His tardiness in coming to their aid and in the dialogue with Him that follows she reaches the height of Christian faith in John's Gospel: belief in Jesus as the Messiah who gives new life. Mary is the model of the disciple who hears the call of Jesus and rises to meet Him. Her emotional reaction to her brother's death draws forth a like emotion on the part of Jesus. Sympathy and fellow feeling are surely sanctified in this episode. So is the assertiveness of Martha. Perhaps this is the virtue needed by women in today's Church, pointing up what is wrong or overlooked and ready to dialogue courageously about it and in that way come to a deeper faith.

READINGS PALM SUNDAY PASSION OF THE LORD:

5 APR '20

Mt. 21:1-11: This passage recounts Jesus' messianic entry into Jerusalem and, at the same time, sets the scene for the mood and meaning of the passion of Jesus which follows later in the Liturgy of the Word.

Is. 50:4-7: The servant speaks of his assigned task which is to help the weary. This task, however, is exposing him to suffering which he does not try to evade, since he trusts patiently in the sure help of God, who will intercede on his behalf.

Phil. 2:6-11: Jesus emptied Himself of His equality with God and takes on the form of a servant who is obedient even unto death, but God raised Him on high and gave Him the name which is above all other names.

Mt. 26:14-27:66: The passion and death of Jesus as recounted by Matthew is seen as the fulfillment of Scripture.

BIBLICAL STUDY OF TODAY'S READINGS

Ez. 37:12-14: The prophet Ezekiel preached to the people of Israel when they were in exile in Babylon. Full of imagery revealing God's power over death, the whole passage consists of a vision (vv. 1-10), followed by verses (vv. 11-14) which interpret it; and this reading is part of that interpretation. The basic message is one of hope that there will be life after exile: God will restore to their own land the people who have been driven from it. This is not an account of bodily resurrection from the dead, but of the rebirth of an exiled people restored to their homeland by an all-loving God, steadfast and constant in having concern for their good. No motive is given, and an element of gratuitousness draws attention to the fact that it is God who is acting. Because the valley of this vision is un-named and un-located, and thus not limited by time or space, the vision can be relevant for every era and location – even to ourselves.

Ps. 129: This familiar psalm is a cry of longing and hope, which lends itself to any situation of disaster. That hope is symbolized by the image of the watcher on the city walls waiting for the first glimmer of daybreak to announce the beginning again of new life. God will return and forgive as surely as daybreak comes each day.

Rom. 8:8-11: In this section of Romans Paul states that those who lead inauthentic lives (v. 9: 'In the flesh' – the whole person caught up in the pursuit of ego) cannot please God. However, Paul's audience is leading authentic lives (v. 9: 'In the Spirit') since the Spirit of God (also Christ's Spirit) dwells within it. The Spirit influences one's entire being. To belong to Christ is to be able to live an authentic life. Without the Spirit such a relationship is impossible. Even though the person (v. 10: 'the body') may be a corpse because of the enormous power called Sin, yet, because of union with Christ, the Spirit makes such a person genuinely alive by the gift of being right with God (v. 10: 'righteousness'). The Spirit manifests the power of the Father in the resurrection of Jesus. In turn, Jesus will communicate that Spirit to all believers at the final resurrection (1 Cor. 15:45).

Jn. 11:1-45: This story points up the paradox that while the desire of Jesus was to give life, the intention of His enemies was to put Him to death. ; the passage in the Lectionary ends with the Jews

who had come sympathize with the sisters believing in Jesus. But it is clear from earlier in the text that others among the Jews were trying to bring about His death.

The story is highly dramatic, with Jesus in dialogue, first with the disciples absent from the scene, and then as He arrives in Bethany with each of the sisters, Martha and Mary, in turn, until finally He reaches the tomb and enters into dialogue with the Father. The theological center of the text is at verses 25-26 where Jesus declares that His is the resurrection and the life to all who believe that His is the Messiah, the Son of God.

'Faith in a general resurrection at some future point is set aside as Jesus proclaims: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in Me, even though they die, will live and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die." Clearly, the life and death referred to here are not biological terms; these are spiritual realities. Life is friendship with God and it begins now. Believing in Jesus, that is being in a trusting relationship with Him, opens the door to this life and the fact of death does not bring this life to an end.' (*The Sign: Reading the Gospel of John*).

This is a beautiful incident which lets us see Jesus' true humanity and His human loves, in His conversations with Martha and Mary. The raising of Lazarus points to Jesus' own resurrection, with many common features: Mary is present at both tombs; each is sealed with a stone; both accounts mention the grave cloths, and Thomas has a special role in both accounts (11:16 and 20:24-28).

LENTEN PRACTICES

Prayer: Try praying with someone this week – at home, at work, on a date – anything from just saying the Our Father together or talking over a Scripture passage.

Fasting: Is there anything in your life you could stop doing (or stop not doing!) just because it doesn't express your real values and beliefs?

Almsgiving: How could you give someone a gift out of the riches of your faith and religion? What do you have as a Catholic that others may not have but might like to know about? How can you make a gift to others by expressing your devotion in liturgy?

REFLECTIONS FOR THE FIFTH WEEK OF LENT

Monday 30 Mar

Dan. 13:1-9; 15-17; 19-30; 33-62: This is the tale of the case against the Sudean Susanna, who is falsely accused by community elders of adultery. Distressed, she trusts her case to God, who vindicates her through the wisdom of Daniel. At issue in this narrative is the question of personal morality. The modesty and integrity of Susanna stressed in this account contrast powerfully with the deceit and lust of the elders who seek both to seduce her and to scapegoat her.

Jn. 8:1-11: There are parallels with the story of Susanna in this story of a woman accused of adultery: public humiliation, the absence of the male adulterer and male religious leaders sitting in judgement. As with Susanna, the accusers are guilty are guilty of sin. Jesus ingeniously leads them to acknowledge this as He places the woman on an equal social and human level with her accusers. Ironically, it is Jesus, who is sinless and who refuses to condemn those who are guilty of sin, who is ultimately condemned to death.

Today's gospel from John is a great one to bring this story to life through contemplative prayer. Using imagination as we pray helps us listen to the stirrings in our heart and brings us closer to God. In this story we are challenged to embody the role of the woman who has been accused by scribes and Pharisees of adultery. Imagining ourselves standing in the hot sun, feet in the dust, humiliated by the crowd of accusers and onlookers you have to feel terrified as memories of what has been seen in the past of what happens in this village to women accused of adultery. There must also be a sense of frustration as, like Susanna in the first reading from Daniel, one is falsely accused as things are not always as they appear, and no one will listen to the one accused, myself. Anger wells in for this lack of justice but you know better than to speak up, as the crowd grows, and you feel the negative energy surge through the people gathered.

Yet you are immediately comforted by the sight of Jesus. Rather than interrogating you or your accusers He remains calm. He is not dismissive but rather the opposite and is very present in the moment. This tranquility helps your own fear dissipate and allows you to remember your faith in Jesus. Curiosity builds as you see Jesus calmly drawing in the dirt. You cannot make out the images and have no idea what He is doing. When He stands up to confront the accusers you cannot not believe what you hear when He says: "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." One by one the men who have accused you walk away and you realize you will not face a horrible death. Then Jesus says to you, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin anymore." What you hear is support and encouragement in the words of Jesus. And you feel renewed strength to live your faith in every aspect of your life.

During this most unusual Lenten season as our world faces the unknowns associated with the pandemic, we should feel gratitude for this reminder of the gentle and purposeful presence of Jesus. There comes the realization that I do not face this or any challenge alone. We need to ask God to show us ways that we can be a calming and supportive presence for others, especially in these times when we may not be able to be physically present. We need to pray for a curiosity to be able to see a variety of perspectives of a situation and to not leap to a quick judgement. And obviously pray for spiritual, mental, emotional and physical healing for our global community.

This refrain from today's Psalm is a powerful prayer for these unsettling times:

Even though I walk in the dark valley I feel no evil; for you are at my side.

Tuesday 31 Mar

Num. 21:4-9 Ps. 101 Jn. 8:21-30

O Lord, hear my prayer, and let my cry come to You.

The words in today's psalm can serve as the foundation of our prayer during this global pandemic of COVID-19. We have lived now for a period of time that is now beginning to wear thin in some form of isolation, working from home, respecting (hopefully) some degree of physical distancing expectations, more aware of personal hygiene in washing hands and sanitizing surfaces. In speaking, obviously by phone, email and texting there is a mix of emotions – overwhelmed, relieved to be safe or secure in our jobs (in my personal case the gratitude that I can function from the rectory and church without the need of calling in a replacement), sad to be missing family and friends and the freedom to move about as we wish, worrying over the scheduling of future events, here at the parish weddings, funerals, baptisms, etc., all those anticipated and planned for celebrations that will not be what was imagined

or planned for, fearful of the unknown, anxious for the future. Now it is important to take each day as it presents itself, seeing in it the opportunities that are brought before us and being able to pray as heard in the Responsorial Psalm.

O Lord, hear my prayer, and let my cry come to you.

O Lord, hear my prayer for those most at risk.

For those whose age and medical condition make them more vulnerable.

For those who are without a home, who live on our streets, who rely on social services to meet their daily needs.

For those whose jobs are at risk.

For the migrants and refugees around the world who are already fleeing for their safety.

O Lord, hear my prayer, and let my cry come to you.

O Lord, hear my prayer for those on the frontlines of response.

For the nurses, doctors, and medical professionals who show up everyday with energy, compassion, and resilience for the work of care ahead of them.

For the grocery store workers and truck drivers keeping shelves stocked.

For home care providers, stay-at-home and work-from-home parents.

For mail carriers and package deliverers.

O Lord, hear my prayer, and let my cry come to you.

O Lord, hear my prayer for leaders making difficult and important decisions.

For leaders of countries, states, and cities.

For leaders of faith communities and places of worship.

For leaders of schools, daycares, and social services.

For leaders of businesses, small and large.

For leaders of hospitals, nursing homes, and clinics.

O Lord, hear my prayer, and let my cry come to you.

O Lord, hear my prayer for those who suffer.

For those who are sick, for those who face death because of this virus.

For those who suffer loneliness, depression, anxiety, and isolation.

For those who have lost their jobs.

For all of us, because in one way or another, we are all suffering right now.

O Lord, hear my prayer, and let my cry come to you.

O Lord, hear my prayer for all those who have died from this virus.

For their loved ones who mourn their death.

O Lord, hear my prayer, and let my cry come to you.

O Lord, hear my prayer for the end of this global pandemic.

O Lord, hear my prayer for relief, healing, hope, and protection.

O Lord, hear my prayer, and let my cry come to you. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, people of faith around the world. Let us continue to pray for the end of this global pandemic and prepare in hope for the dawn that is to come. For this to impact so many countries during this time of Lent, this time of darkness, of preparation, of sacrifice does not go unnoticed. This time feels dark. And, as a

Christian, I believe that Easter will come. That light, hope, and love will win out. That eventually, this darkness will pass. I continue to pray, to cry out to God.

Wednesday 1 Apr

Dan. 3:14-20,24-25 Jn. 8:31-42

The first reading calls to mind the times we've been living in the last weeks. Nothing like a burning oven image to think of the hot water myself and all of us have been thinking we are in. There is a lesson to be learned from the young men. Even as the fire burned hotter, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego remained calm and loyal to their God. In the epicenter of the furnace they remained unhurt through their faith and loyalty to God; even Nebuchadnezzar was amazed.

Jesus in the Gospel speaks to us with a simple formula. "If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Christ is certainly talking about a salvific message further on in the passage. Much of His message is also for us in our daily life. We may seem to be in the middle of a burning furnace now but with our reliance on Christ at the center our lives, we will be in the only place we need to be to ride out these times of uncertainty.

Thursday 2 Apr

Gen. 17:3-9 Jn. 8:51-59

Over the past weeks we have been forced to develop a sense of a new normal or perhaps more accurately to realize that there are other dimensions of what we can see and have as normal in our lives. Time To consider how we use our time develop our relationships with family, each other; how we identify our talents and abilities, honing them to be most productive; how we mature in our understanding of faith and its full enhancement of God's gift of life and the awareness of what He is calling forth from each of us.

The fact that these readings fall in this week of Lent right before Holy Week point us in the right direction in preparing for the holiest week in the Church's calendar. The publication *Give Us This Day – Daily Prayer of Today's Catholic* contained the following excerpt from Msgr. John J. Michonne's *Forty Days Plus Three*:

"...Jesus represented the final covenant God made with humankind....

The mark of the new covenant was Jesus Christ and his new way of living....

God designed that a divinely chosen people be distinguished from all others by the kind of love Jesus generously displayed."

Pandemic or no pandemic look at the state of our world... a record number of refugees; communities in danger due to climate change, societal changes, economic changes; education systems that appear to be losing the fight to adequately prepare the next generation; religious denominations and church communities that come across as being irrelevant lacking the ability to articulate an ethic and morality that holds the attention of true disciples; an obscene number of children still dying each day from malnourishment or preventable diseases; and countless other horrors. The human misery index is soaring and many of us are paralyzed by what Pope Francis calls the "Globalization of Indifference". Since we didn't cause it and certainly cannot fix it, we either do nothing or look the other way.

Unquestionably these are uncertain times. Many people are frightened about what is happening and what it means for the future. They are afraid and worried about their health, their finances, their loved ones. There is not a clear path to follow as we are in uncharted territory. We can panic or stress

out about this crisis the world is experiencing or we could look at this time in our world as an opportunity.

It is ironic that our world is being hit with COVID19 during the Lenten season when social distancing is what we are being urged to practice by health experts. We are being told to avoid large gathering, to work from home, and almost all businesses are closed except grocery stores. To be constantly conscience of washing hands, and touching surfaces, of where we have been and around whom have we spent our time. Is this extraordinary time an invitation from God to review our response to the final covenant that Jesus represents? Can we take this unexpected 'time out' to reflect on how we could model Jesus' generosity? To love as Jesus did...to do what we can, where we can? None of us can solve the mess we are in, but surely, we all can do something to reduce the misery we see.

It is heartening to hear of the rookie NBA basketball player from New Orleans who stepped up to pay the wages of the arena workers who were thrown out of work when the NBA cancelled its season. His generosity spurred other NBA players and owners to do the same thing.

Could this be our moment? The time to renew God's final covenant? Can we move away from war and violence? Can we create societies where all people have the opportunity to thrive? The thoughts of a dreamer? I think not, change begins with like minded individuals are able to envision the possibilities and work towards there achievement. Right now we have some unexpected opportunities, are we willing to use this time to come together and work to create God's kingdom in our communities and the world. As followers of Jesus we know there is a better way. Following Jesus' example will take lots of prayer and courage, but isn't that what Lent is about?

Consider the poem "Lockdown" by Bro. Richard Hendrick

Lockdown

Yes there is fear.

Yes there is isolation.

Yes there is panic buying.

Yes there is sickness.

Yes there is even death.

But,

They say that in Wuhan after so many years of noise

You can hear the birds again.

They say that after just a few weeks of quiet

The sky is no longer thick with fumes

But blue and grey and clear.

They say that in the streets of Assisi

People are singing to each other

across the empty squares,

keeping their windows open

so that those who are alone

may hear the sounds of family around them.

They say that a hotel in the West of Ireland

Is offering free meals and delivery to the housebound.

Today a young woman I know

is busy spreading fliers with her number

through the neighborhood
So that the elders may have someone to call on.
Today Churches, Synagogues, Mosques and Temples
are preparing to welcome
and shelter the homeless, the sick, the weary
All over the world people are slowing down and reflecting
All over the world people are looking at their neighbors in a new way
All over the world people are waking up to a new reality
To how big we really are.
To how little control we really have.
To what really matters.
To Love.
So we pray and we remember that
Yes there is fear. But there does not have to be hate.
Yes there is isolation. But there does not have to be loneliness.
Yes there is panic buying. But there does not have to be meanness.
Yes there is sickness. But there does not have to be disease of the soul.
Yes there is even death. But there can always be a rebirth of love.
Wake to the choices you make as to how to live now.
Today, breathe.
Listen, behind the factory noises of your panic
The birds are singing again
The sky is clearing,
Spring is coming,
And we are always encompassed by Love.
Open the windows of your soul
And though you may not be able
to touch across the empty square,
Sing.

Friday 3 Apr

Jer. 20:10-13 Jn. 10:31-42

Jesus met much opposition from the Jewish religious authorities. They were antagonized by His attitudes to the Law and to the Temple. His keeping company with tax collectors and sinners scandalized them. But it is especially when He identifies His mercy towards sinners as being God's attitude, and by forgiving sins, that they are horrified at what seems blasphemy. The final claim of divine identity is too much for them. 'Yet many of them believed in Him.' Jeremiah also created division. Both suffered from this lack of belief and were supported by the knowledge that the fLord was on their side. It is God who will be the final judge of the rightness of the cause. To God we must turn in time of trial

Saturday 4 Apr

Ez. 37:21-28 Jn. 11:45-56

So now we turn to today's gospel and we are reminded of what is coming. In so many ways the next seven days are awful as we know of the pain and suffering Jesus will be enduring. The drama that unfolds during Holy Week is vivid, compelling, and agonizing. Even though we know it will end in resurrection the journey is not an easy one.

Today's reading sets the stage for the week, but also reminds us of the beauty and depth of God's love. Such irony in Caiaphis saying Jesus needed to die to save all of us as that is what he actually did. He died to save us. Let's heed the words of our wise doctor and not take this moment for granted. In the week ahead we can choose to stress about Easter dinner or we can walk with Jesus through his most beautiful awful. Let's walk alongside him and be reminded of his profound love for us. Let's let the passion of what has been done for us wash over us and help us find our own resurrection.

WHAT ABOUT NEXT WEEK? WHAT ABOUT HOLY WEEK?

We are all aware that the situation is constantly changing with the rate of infection continually increasing. Therefore the response/s of elected officials, governmental agencies, health organizations and the Church and its leaders is continually shifting and adapting in an attempt to provide as much safety to the community as possible.

As of right now Catholic parishes have been instructed to provide live stream liturgies during this holiest Season of the year. At the moment of this printing the schedule followed here at St. Stephen, Martyr is as follows:

PALM SUNDAY

LIVE STREAMED MASS 8:30 AM

HOLY THURSDAY

LIVE STREAMED MASS 7:00 PM

LIVE STREAMED ADORATION TILL MIDNIGHT

GOOD FRIDAY

STATIONS OF THE CROSS 3:00 PM

LIVE STREAMED VENERATION OF THE CROSS

AND PRAYER 7:00 PM

HOLY SATURDAY LIVE STREAMED VIGIL MASS 8:00 PM

EASTER SUNDAY LIVE STREAMED MASS 8:30 AM

THIS SCHEDULE IS SUBJECT TO CHANGE AS THE SITUATION CONTINUES TO UNFOLD FOR US. YOU WILL BE INFORMED BY ME AS SOON AS THERE ARE CHANGES ORDERED BY THE BISHOP.

PRAYERS

Prayers for a Spiritual Communion

My Jesus, I believe that you are present in the most Blessed Sacrament. I love You above all things and I desire to receive You into my soul. Since I cannot now receive You sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. I embrace You as if You were already there, and unite myself wholly to You. Never permit me to be separated from You. Amen.

Oh Jesus, I turn toward the holy tabernacle where You live hidden for love of me. I love you, O my God. I cannot receive you in Holy Communion. Come, nevertheless, and visit me with Your grace. Come spiritually into my heart. Purify it. Sanctify it. Render it like unto Your own. Amen.