Spirituality
Scripture for Life



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Lex orandi, lex credendi! This ancient dictum states that “The law of prayer is the law of belief.” Interpreted in a general way, it means that the way we pray is a very good sign of what we believe, or that our prayer forms our belief. It is a pretty solid principle, much like the advice that if you want to know how a guy will treat his future wife, watch how he treats his mother and sisters. But, just as you can’t always tell the difference between affectionate teasing and disrespect, we may all say the same words in our prayer and hold to entirely different concepts behind them. Today’s Gospel features a key statement by Jesus that can be interpreted in very diverse and even mutually exclusive ways.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.” There are interpretations of this that suggest that Jesus’ mission was to atone to God for human sin by dying a painful death. That point of view believes that according to justice, God had to exact a fitting punishment for sin, but that in mercy God sent the Son as the only one who could adequately pay the price. This allows people to see God as both just and merciful and says that anyone who believes in Jesus can receive the benefit of his sacrifice. This theory can be buttressed by any number of scriptural quotations when one reads them from this mindset.

This Sunday’s readings offer an alternative interpretation of the statement by showing both its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures and one expression in Ephesians of Paul’s reflections on its theme. The readings present an image of God who is relentless in reaching out to lost humanity. This alternative is beautifully articulated in Eucharistic Prayer IV which could have been written with these readings in mind. The selection from Chronicles briefly summarizes salvation history: The people sin and God tries in every possible way to save them. We hear that poetically expressed in the eucharistic prayer, which, when translated into a dialogue instead of a proclamation, sounds like this: “You formed us in your own image ... When through disobedience we lost your friendship, you did not abandon us ... but came in mercy ... so that we who seek you might find you. Time and again you offered us covenants ... and prophets ... and taught us to hope for salvation.”

This eucharistic prayer reflects the Gospel of John as it says, “In the fullness of time, you sent your only begotten Son to be our Savior.” John adds, not to condemn the world, but “so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.” The eucharistic prayer states “To accomplish your plan, he gave himself up to death … he destroyed death and restored life.” In John’s Gospel Jesus says, “So must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

When Jesus speaks of his being lifted up as our salvation, as a light and a path to life, we begin to realize that he is talking about the cross as the ultimate revelation of love. Instead of compensating to God for human sin, Jesus reveals God's self-offering to humanity, God's unceasing love. No matter what we do to reject that love, God continually offers us eternal life. All we have to do is accept it.

In the selection from the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul sounds almost like he's stammering with emotion as he expounds on this expression of God's great love and mercy. Paul calls it the grace of being joined to Christ and destined for eternal union with him. The eucharistic prayer expresses this by saying, "that we might live no longer for ourselves but for him ... he sent the Holy Spirit ... so that, bringing to perfection his work in the world, he might sanctify creation to the full."

Lex orandi, lex credendi. Some add lex vivendi, indicating that as we pray and believe, so shall we live. On this Fourth Sunday of Lent, we are invited to look at our prayer, our belief and our life and to ask ourselves: How does our prayer form our belief? What image of God is in our heart when we hear that God so loved the world that he sent his only Son? And perhaps most importantly, how is our prayer and our image of God made manifest in our daily interactions?

2 CHRONICLES 36:14-16, 19-23

The Books of Chronicles are the last in the Hebrew canon of Scripture. They show a keen interest in ethics and the disastrous results of sin along with a genuine appreciation of the value of good worship. The selection heard today comes from the end of 2 Chronicles and thus holds a place of great importance as the end, the last word of the Hebrew canon of Scripture.

We might read this selection as a summary of the history of God's interaction with humanity: The people consistently fail and God loves them faithfully in spite of it all. The author is unashamed to admit the sin of the people, saying that they added infidelity to infidelity, and yet God had compassion on them. The author even adds that God's compassion extended to "his dwelling place" among them, an indication that no amount of infidelity or abomination was sufficient to discourage the God who chooses to inhabit the same space as those who were created in the divine image.

In spite of God's ongoing love, the people's sinful practices showed themselves for what they were: a pattern of self-destruction that made them indefensible against their enemies. No matter how many messengers God sent, the people went their own way until their enemies conquered, pillaged and exiled them. But even then, the God whose patience knows no bounds never forgot them.

Although the passage depicts sin and suffering and the destruction of the holy city and deportation, the real story was God's everlasting and creative love. The preface of the Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation I (from the 1975 edition of the Sacramentary) echoed and summarized this reading by proclaiming, "Time and again we broke your covenant, but you did not abandon us." But what the people learned in their time of exile was that while they were dependent on God that dependence was not mutual: Their betrayal could not stymie God. When Israel brought about her own ruin, God used a foreigner to save them.

The Hebrew Scriptures, thus, come to a close with a promise of restoration and a demonstration that the God of the chosen people is the God of the universe, not just of one people or place. The message is that all of history contains the seeds of God's saving love and there is no people whom God cannot employ as agents to carry forward the divine plan. That message is a double-edged sword: The promise that God will save is combined with the humbling realization that others can and often do serve God better than the chosen people.

PSALMS 137:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6

The refrain we sing today is really a self-inflicted curse: "Let my tongue be silenced if I ever forget you!" The singers promise to remember their sorrow for as long as they have breath. While that may sound like a perfect formula for creating a depressed nation, for people in exile it is also a sign of faithfulness and resistance to their oppressors. It is a promise to refuse to be enchanted or seduced by the goods or gods of a pagan land. They will always remember what could have been and should be.

This psalm opens with a sorry scene. The singers are sitting by a stream, a place where people should be as content as a tree planted near running water. But these singers say they can do no more than weep because they long for their

homeland. Was it mockery or supremely ignorant insensitivity that caused the captors to tell the people to sing their songs?

Undoubtedly, there is bitterness in the psalm: “How can we sing a song of the Lord in a foreign land?” People with today’s mobility and sense of global communications may not understand the feeling the Jews had for their promised land. Their very identity was tied to the fact that God had given them that land. To be exiled was tantamount to being excommunicated, even abandoned. They couldn’t be who they were if the land had been taken over and they were moved away from it.

What does it mean for us to pray this psalm? In The Psalms: Songs of Faith and Praise, Benedictine Abbot Primate Gregory Polan suggests that we might pray this psalm in solidarity with people in exile and the oppressed. Taking that a step further, we might do as Pope Francis suggests in “Laudato Si’, on Care for Our Common Home,” and pray this psalm as a dirge with “sister earth, along with all the abandoned of our world, to cry out, pleading that we take another course” (#55). Francis suggests that “If we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously” (#11).

Psalm 137 offers us the challenging invitation to allow ourselves to feel the pain of what is lacking in what should be communion among earth, her creatures and our Creator. Jesus promised, “Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted.” Praying this psalm invites us to weep with our Israelite ancestors because we, too, see despoilers who ask for happy tunes in the midst of death and destruction. There are situations which call us to weep, tragic realities that call us to threaten ourselves with a curse if we forget the communion that God intended for creation. May we have the courage to pray this psalm in the name of oppressed peoples and our suffering Mother Earth. Then, we will also be able to know the comfort that only our Creator can offer us.

EPHESIANS 2:4-10

Paul, or the person writing in his name, went overboard with exuberance in this selection from Ephesians. It is as if he had been overtaken with wonder and joy at God’s great love for humankind.

He begins by speaking of God’s rich mercy, the mercy which flows from God’s love. As we meditate on that, we realize that Paul is describing God’s emotions and how those divine emotions flow into the concrete actions that are signs of God’s mercy. Underlying both the emotion and the action is God’s deliberate purpose, an unrelenting desire to bring all into union with Christ.

In order to express God’s purpose, Paul invents words to depict the depth of the union God is bringing about. When Paul says that God brought us to life with Christ, he uses a word that might be translated as “co-enlivened.” This isn’t like accomplishing something for two separate people who happen to be in one another’s presence; it refers to carrying out something that changes them both in the same way. Co-enlivening affects both in a way that is an intrinsic element of the change itself. The difference between bringing separate people to life in Christ and co-enlivening them in Christ might be like that between eating together at the same table or being thrust together into a vat of paint. During a meal, the participants have their own experience of nourishment and a common experience of one another, even communion. But when they are plunged together, the very same thing is happening to everyone involved, they are all changed, becoming thoroughly immersed in and colored by the same hue. Paul’s vocabulary indicates that we are co-enlivened with Christ, made alive with him, just as we would be changed with him, if thrust together into the same vat. So too, says Paul, we were raised up with Christ and are seated with him in the heavens. According to Paul, Christ’s experience can be our own, if only we will be open to it.

All of this is the result of God’s mercy, God’s immeasurable grace, the kindness God shows us. It has nothing to do with our worthiness, only our willingness. Thus, Paul says no one may boast, but we can all be God’s own handiwork.

JOHN 3:14-21

In explaining himself and his mission, Jesus alludes to a very odd story from the Exodus tradition. When venomous snakes attacked the discontented people in the desert (Numbers 21), the God who had forbidden the people to make images and who condemned Aaron’s golden calf as an idol, told Moses to mold a serpent of bronze that people could look

on and be healed.

The images are quite different: the calf represented a foreign god and the serpent a demonic figure. But why would God command the people to gaze on the serpent? Rudolf Schnackenburg says in his book, The Gospel of John, that "Jewish mystics explained looking at the serpent as looking upon evil in order to turn away from it." Gazing on the repulsive, frightening serpent was a symbol of admitting sin and seeking God's help. It's almost an anticipation of the first six of Alcoholics Anonymous' 12 steps which take people in recovery from recognizing their powerlessness to asking God to transform them.

When we take the idea deeper, it becomes clear that the only reason to look at sin, to think about it, or to admit our guilt, is because we know that forgiveness is a possibility. As theologian James Alison explains in Jesus the Forgiving Victim, the concept of sin is "derived from forgiveness, which massively precedes them and enables them to be understood as that which can be forgiven." If forgiveness were not a possibility, there would be no reason to speak of sin because no change, no transformation could ever take place; things would simply be as they are, miserable or fortunate as fate would have it. God told Moses to fashion a serpent, a symbol of sin and misery, and have the people gaze on it. When they faced it, they could understand that it was not the only possibility open to them. God was greater than the snake. Similarly, the life Jesus offered was stronger than death: there was no reason to fear.

Jesus' statement to Nicodemus, that the Son of Man must be lifted up, was the first of three times he spoke of being lifted up in John's Gospel (3:14, 8:28, 12:32). These three statements are John's counterparts to the Synoptics' three passion predictions, but in John's Gospel they all speak of glorification rather than humiliation and suffering. Jesus uses the image of Moses raising up the serpent as a foreshadowing of how he will be raised up, how his cross will be a sign of victory and the offer of eternal life.

The perspective John presents is suffused with God's love and benevolence toward all of creation. A translation of Silvano Fausti's book, Una Comunidad Lee el Evangelio de Juan, suggests: "In contemplating the Crucified One we are purified of the serpent's poisonous lie that distorted our knowledge of the Father and made us flee from him." Jesus the Christ, glorified on the cross, is the ultimate sign of human faith and divine love.

Today's Scriptures simply proclaim God's great love. Chronicles recounts that when God's insider messengers couldn't get through to the people, God allowed the exile and a foreign potentate to be the instruments of drawing them back into the fold. Paul had to invent vocabulary to try to describe God's love. Jesus explains that God's entire plan for the world is to share eternal life. That's how much God loves the world.

Planning: 4th Sunday of Lent

By: Lawrence Mick

Today is Laetare Sunday, the midpoint of Lent. Will your people notice? When they enter the worship space, will this Sunday look different from last week? Will the music sound different?

Laetare means "rejoice." The entrance antiphon in the Missal reads, "Rejoice, Jerusalem, and all who love her. Be joyful, all who were in mourning; exult and be satisfied at her consoling breast." We don't often use the entrance antiphon because we begin the liturgy with a hymn. Seeing what the Missal has, however, can guide us in choosing our opening song. Can the musicians find a hymn or song that echoes the theme of that antiphon?

Whether people notice that this Sunday is different somehow will probably depend on how the rest of Lent is being observed. The Missal notes: "In this Mass, the color violet or rose is used. Instrumental music is permitted, and the altar may be decorated with flowers." That rubric assumes that instrumental music is not being used on other Lenten days and that flowers are not evident during the rest of Lent. The color of vestments is optional, but a rose vestment is a clear symbol that this day is different.

The décor and the vestments are relatively easy to adjust for Lent. The more challenging (and thus often ignored) guidance is the one about music. The rubric at the beginning of Lent (see Ash Wednesday in the Missal) says: “During Lent, it is not permitted to decorate the altar with flowers, and the use of musical instruments is allowed only so as to support the singing.” It goes on to note that Laetare Sunday, solemnities and feasts are exceptions to this rule.

What might work in your community? One easy step is to remind all the musicians that silence is a value in every liturgy and especially during this penitential season. So even if instruments are used to support the assembly’s singing, there should be no purely instrumental music. When people are not singing, let silence reign.

Beyond that, how can musicians scale back the instruments for Lent? Can organists use a simpler and lighter registration of stops? Can some songs be accompanied by a single instrument, like a flute or violin or guitar? Can the assembly actually sing many songs without instrumental accompaniment? A good cantor can get people started on the right note and keep the pace of the singing steady. One advantage of this approach is that people may actually hear themselves singing. They may well be surprised at how well they can do without instruments supporting them, which might increase their confidence in singing the rest of the year. Talk with the musicians and see what can be done to simplify the aural environment in Lent.

Prayers: 4th Sunday of Lent

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

This season is given to us for our spiritual growth and ongoing conversion. Today’s readings remind us that God has shown mercy throughout history. An understanding of Israel’s painful exile and God’s ongoing fidelity are important for us and our own review of how God’s mercy has been reflected in our personal lives. Today, we have another chance to make this story our own.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you were sent to us by the God who loves us: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you came to bring us truth and light: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us so that we may have eternal life: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray for those who have not yet experienced God’s great mercy and in gratitude for those of us who have.

Minister For the whole church: That we may be a people of deep gratitude for God’s ongoing, gracious mercy … remembering your constant love, we pray,

- For those throughout the world who suffer because of their faith, and for those places torn apart by religious wars … remembering your constant love, we pray,
- For those Christians unwilling or unable to share God’s loving mercy toward others, especially those deemed unworthy … remembering your constant love, we pray,
- For those of us who are too arrogant to think we need God’s mercy or the call to conversion … remembering your constant love, we pray,
- For a spirit of joy that we may give faithful witness to God’s ever-present love in our lives … remembering your constant love, we pray,

- For those preparing for baptism or entry into the church; and for those accompanying and supporting them in this process … remembering your constant love, we pray,

Presider Loving God, you have shown your unending mercy to us and to countless generations before us. Heal us when we are arrogant, prod us when we are forgetful, and show us how to extend your mercy to others. In Jesus' holy name, we pray. Amen.

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