

Reflection on the Sunday Readings

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Trust

All three of today's readings speak of the need for faith. They remind us that as Lent begins, trust will see us through. God will act on our behalf. The Spirit will lead us. We simply must have faith.

FIRST READING: Deuteronomy 26:4–10 RESPONSORIAL PSALM: Psalm 91:1–2, 10–11, 12–13, 14–15

SECOND READING: Romans 10:8–13 GOSPEL: Luke 4:1–13

Comment

The first reading contains the Israelites' credo in a God who would not—could not—forget them or abandon them. No matter how many times the people fell from grace, their choice to call upon God for help has brought them rescue and relief. This passage is crucial to Jewish faith and is included in the Passover *Haggadah*.

The passage from Romans also speaks of the necessity and power of faith. Those who have faith in Christ will not be put to shame. Their shared faith will make them sisters and brothers in the Lord and beneficiaries of God's rich mercy.

The Gospel recounts how Jesus' ministry began with an act of faith, an act of faith in God. In the desert Jesus struggled over three tempting paths that were set before him: choosing possessions—instant bread; choosing dominion—instant power; choosing popularity—instant fame. This is the unholy trinity that continues to seduce human hearts. Jesus would have none of it. In responding to the temptations, Jesus made three key points about his mission and ministry.

First, Jesus refused to take any shortcuts, knowing that no matter how appealing they may be, they lead only to dead ends. Instead, he remembered his baptism and the inauguration of his ministry. He recalled that the words from heaven had identified him with the prophet Isaiah's Suffering Servant of God: "Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased, upon whom I have put my spirit" (Isaiah 42:1). Moreover, Jesus' forty-day fast in the desert had identified him with the wilderness suffering—the very real hunger and thirst—of his ancestors who had spent forty difficult years wandering in the desert.

Second, Jesus refused to be a power player in a political game. Later, he would be a big disappointment to those who had hoped for a political—even military—messiah. Finally, Jesus turned his back on becoming a dazzling crowd pleaser. He chose instead to remain obedient to the will of God, obedient even to his shameful death on the cross. The choice to be faithful to the will of God will mark the mission and ministry of Jesus.

Reflection

Take a moment to look at some United States currency—any denomination, paper or coin, will do. Notice the phrase printed on it: "In God we trust." Since 1956, this has been our country's formal motto. Interesting, isn't it, that it took us almost two hundred years to make it official? Clearly God has trusted us far longer.

Trust or faith in God is at the heart of all of today's readings, as it is every Sunday. This week, as Lent begins, the readings call our attention to two different facets of our faith. First, they remind us that life constantly tests our faith as individuals and as God's people. Second, they assure us that no matter the test life throws our way, we can continue to trust, to have faith in God, because God is faithful. God will not lose faith in us. God will support us and see us through.

In our need to trust constantly and consistently in God, we are no different from the ancient Israelites of the first reading or the fledgling Roman Church of the second reading. It is against that background that the Christians of Luke's time heard the Gospel story of Jesus overcoming temptation and passing the test of trust.

The common reality in all this is the Word of God that nourishes and sustains our faith. Even though faith is God's gift to us, it isn't really ours until we live it, allow it to be tested, and then invite God into our lives to support and strengthen our faith. That's why we can say that the process of testing purifies or refines faith. At the same time we discover that God is a God we can trust, and who is more than worthy of such trust. Our guarantee is the presence of the Holy Spirit in each of us, in the Church: the same Spirit who led Jesus through the desert now leads us.

Reflection on the Weekday Readings

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 22

FEAST OF THE CHAIR OF PETER, APOSTLE

Thou art Peter

The church celebrates a couple of feast days for buildings, but today is the only one dedicated to a piece of furniture! Of course the “chair” of Peter is a symbol of the pope’s authority, much like a “chairperson” has charge of a meeting. Peter and his successors, the popes, ensure the unity of the church. Because the pope is the “rock” of Matthew’s gospel, it is he who affirms what is believed. He holds the “keys to the kingdom” in that he teaches the world the way of life that leads to fulfillment.

TODAY’S READINGS: *1 Peter 5:1-4; Matthew 16:13-19*
“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.”

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 23

FEAST OF POLYCARP, BISHOP, MARTYR

Living memory

We can be sure that the practice of venerating the relics of saints began very early in the church. The first evidence for it comes from a letter dated around 150 A.D. concerning the martyrdom of Polycarp. The letter relates that following Polycarp’s execution the Romans refused the Christians his body, deciding rather to burn it. The Christians then gathered together his bones, “being more precious than the most exquisite jewels, and more purified than gold.” They put these bones in a place of distinction where they would gather together and revere them, especially on the anniversary of Polycarp’s martyrdom. Remember the sacrifices of Christian martyrs and give yourself wholeheartedly to a life of faith.

TODAY’S READINGS: *Isaiah 55:10-11; Matthew 6:7-15*

“My word . . . shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 24

LENTEN WEEKDAY

The sign of Jonah

Jesus comparing himself to Jonah may sound a little mysterious to modern ears, but his original audience would have known what he was talking about pretty quickly. You remember Jonah, don’t you? Rescued by God from the belly of a great fish after three days and nights (sound familiar?). Sent by God to read the riot act to the wicked city of Nineveh. Walked around the place crying, “Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overthrown!”—and lo and behold everyone from the king on down repented as fast as they could, and God decided to spare them. Jonah was so spectacularly successful that he got mad—wasn’t this supposed to be harder? Like Jonah, Jesus calls his hearers to change their lives and return to God. Lent could not have a better goal.

TODAY’S READINGS: *Jonah 3:1-10; Luke 11:29-32*
“The people of Nineveh believed God.”

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 25

LENTEN WEEKDAY

As good as gold

The Golden Rule of “do unto others,” the ethic of reciprocity Jesus summarizes in the gospel, shows up in one form or another in many cultures and religious traditions. Perhaps that happens because it seems to be such a logical and self-evident truth—who among us does not wish to be treated with respect, fairness, dignity, and kindness? Why, then, is it so hard at times to do the same for others? Evidence, perhaps, that each of us is a work in progress. Pray for a generous heart today.

TODAY’S READINGS: *Esther C:12, 14-16, 23-25; Matthew 7:7-12*
“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.”

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 26

LENTEN WEEKDAY

Beyond the law

Jesus was a master at turning ideas upside-down and inviting folks to see things from a new perspective. His teaching on reconciliation is a good example. People knew that they should follow the law “you shall not kill.” But Jesus took it further. He urged people to do more than follow laws in order to be free. He urged them to heal divisions, to reconcile with one another so as not to be held captive by anger or vengeance. That can be a very challenging thing to do. It requires us to face the hurt or bad feelings that we have and move forward in our relationships, finding healing and freedom. Consider your own relationships and ask God for the grace to right a broken one.

TODAY’S READINGS: *Ezekiel 18:21-28; Matthew 5:20-26*

“If . . . your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled.”

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Readings for next Sunday’s Liturgy: February 28: Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18; Psalm 27:1, 7-8, 8-9, 13-14; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 9:28b-36.