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Celebrant's Guide and Commentary and Reflections for Sundays and Festivals (March 4, 2007)

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Celebrant's Guide and Commentary and Reflections for Sundays and Festivals

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SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT
March 4, 2007

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INTRODUCTION TO THE MASS

The liturgical rhythms of Lent prepare us to appreciate the Paschal Mystery of our Lord's suffering, death-and-resurrection more deeply. May his grace and love resonate in our daily lives!

INVITATION TO REPENTANCE

In Baptism each of us entered into the mystery of Christ's death-and-resurrection and became the beneficiary of new life. We acknowledge our failure to follow the pattern of loving service to which we have been called.

Lord, we have sinned against you and our neighbor. Lord have mercy.
Christ, we have neglected responsibilities of our calling. Christ, have mercy.
Lord, we ask forgiveness and peace of heart. Lord have mercy.

HEADINGS FOR THE READINGS

First Reading (Genesis 15:5-12). Abram confirms his faith in God's plan for the descendants promised to him.

Second Reading (Philippians 3:17-4:1). The promise to share in Christ's resurrection sustains Christians in their tribulations.

Gospel (Luke 9:28-36). The experience of Christ transfigured is given so that disciples will persevere with him in trials.

Prayer of the Faithful

President: Through Baptism we are united with Christ and each other for time and eternity. In the vicissitudes of our earthly pilgrimage we present these petitions in faith and confidence.

Reader(s):

May all Church leaders, especially those suffering persecution, manifest the pattern of Christ's love in their daily lives, we pray to the Lord.

May all Christians stand courageously for the principles of the Gospel and for the dignity of the poor and weak, we pray to the Lord

May all who suffer because of war and violence be delivered from evil, we pray to the Lord.

May those to be baptized in the Easter Vigil be strengthened for service of the Church according to their vocation, we pray to the Lord.

May all who have died recently, especially those who suffered alone, be granted the peace of the Kingdom, we pray to the Lord.

President: Merciful Father, you sent your Son to reconcile all peoples to you and to each other. May the Church and her members grow in faithful imitation of Christ in his suffering, so as to share in his exaltation. We ask all your blessings through the same Christ our Lord.

INTRODUCTION TO THE LORD'S PRAYER

As Jesus prayed in Gethsemani to do your will, we unite our prayers with his and rejoice in the privilege of being your children.

INVITATION TO THE SIGN OF PEACE

Christ's gift of peace came at great cost, so we accept the challenge to become peacemakers in his name. May our sign of peace give evidence of the faith that works through love.

COMMUNION REFLECTION

Heavenly Father, may our Lenten observance draw us into union with your Son's suffering and death, the source of our strength and courage as we face the trials of daily life in your service. Renewed by his presence in this Eucharistic sacrifice, may we be steadfast in our defense of those most in need.

COMMENTARY

First Reading (Genesis 15:5-12). “Faith comes through hearing” (see Romans 10:14-17). This principle stresses the role witnesses and teachers for Israel and for the Church. The first community of faith, Abram, Sarah and Lot, responded to a command: “Go from your country... to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation...” (Gen 12:1-2). The message came to the leader, who convinced his wife and nephew to embark on a journey without a map or destination. In our culture a person who hear voices would be committed for mental evaluation!

This Sunday’s reading might have begun with the statement that the word of the LORD came to Abram in a *vision*. This must have been at night because he was invited to count the stars. The audition assured him: “Fear not Abram, I am your shield; your reward will be very great” (15:1). Knowing that we must cooperate with God to fulfil our vocation, we struggle to identify the path we should follow. So Abram reminded God of the promise that he would have numerous descendants (see Gen 13:14-17). Without children, should he adopt his servant? The response was clear:...”Your own son shall be your heir” (15:4). Abram’s faith was firm. “He believed the LORD and he reckoned it to him as righteousness” (15:6). This renewal of commitment came before God changed his name to Abraham (“Father of many nations”) and gave the commandment to circumcise males in his family (17:1-8). St. Paul used this text to establish that God’s gift of faith is the essential foundation for meritorious works of charity and service (see Romans 4:3-23).

Psalm 27:1, 7-9, 13-14. In the midst of life's joys and trials the faithful acknowledge that God delivers them and provides for all their needs. They must only seek his face, i.e. look for the divine presence in worship and in daily life.

Second Reading (Philippians 3:17-4:1). The letters of St. Paul emphasize the Christian's dependence on the efficacy of Jesus' work accomplished above all in his death-and-resurrection. This is experienced in Baptism (Rom 6:3-4; Gal 3:26-29) and in the other sacraments and explored further in prayer and reflection upon the (Jewish) Scriptures. Because Jesus has restored humanity to right order with God, faith in him subdues the human desire to consider that a right relationship with God may be achieved by diligence and hard work (see Phil 3:4-9). Knowing the risen Christ in faith, Paul saw the value of participating in his sufferings, "becoming like him in his death that, if possible, I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (3:10-11).

The challenge to the Christian teacher, whether clergy, professional or parent, is to embody the ideals of Jesus so that others are inspired to search for a similar intimacy with the Lord. "Have this mind in you which was in Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:5) expresses the principle well. Thus, like Paul, one can say: "I can do all things in him who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13). Then the community and its members will await the return of Christ, "who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him to subject all things to himself" (Phil 3:21). The goal of Lenten prayer and self-discipline is to incorporate the model of Jesus' suffering into our lives so that faith in his triumph over death will lead to deeds that reflect his presence upon the world of our time.

Gospel (Luke 9:28-36). The first three Gospels link the Transfiguration to both the Baptism and the Passion of Jesus. Early in Lent the perspective of the resurrection of Jesus reminds us that ascetical practices are but a means to the goal of life in communion with God. Also, Luke's frequent and explicit references to Jesus at prayer draw our attention to the importance of making all major decisions of life after spiritual deliberation. The example of Jesus inspired the disciples to ask for lessons in prayer (see Lk 11:1-4).

In their account of Jesus' baptism Mark and Luke record that the voice from heaven was addressed to Jesus: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Lk 3:22). Luke had stressed already that Jesus has a unique relationship with God the Father (see 2:49). By association with sinners seeking repentance, Jesus' baptism involves the designation of *servant* dedicated to teach and guide all people so that they would return to God. Possibly the words evoked the account of Abram and Isaac at Mt. Moriah (Gen 22:2) but the background is clearly the first Servant song in Isaiah: "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one, in whom I delight" (42:1). In Lk 9:35 the command "listen to him!" placed a concrete demand on the three apostles. Jesus had spoken about his suffering, death and resurrection on the third day (Lk 9:21) but they failed to grasp the message until the risen Lord manifested himself. Faith as insight matured slowly, as in the case of Abraham and Sarah, but the underlying relationship with God the Father, who had taken them into his presence in the cloud, would be the basis for their obedience to the commission to be Jesus' witnesses to the ends of the earth (see Act 1:8).

REFLECTION

All aspects of our worship throughout the year are intended to lead us into deeper communion with God, to prepare the Church and each of her members to share in Christ's triumph over death. The readings on the first Sunday of Lent point to Jesus, Son and Servant, in the human struggle with temptation and to his death in Jerusalem. The second Sunday anticipates the joy of Jesus' resurrection

as the basis for our assurance of the fullness of life in eternal communion with the Father and in the Holy Spirit. "We have our citizenship in heaven; from here we eagerly await the coming of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil 3:20).

Every experience of our eternal destiny is based upon God's call and free gift in the Covenant. "From the dawn of the chosen people's history, Abraham is depicted as being called to leave his country, his family and his father's house, while the Apostle (St. Paul) repeatedly teaches that the same calling was the beginning of a long mystical journey to a homeland which is not of this world" (Sacred Congregation for Religious, *Instruction* of August 15, 1969). The poignancy of Abram and Sarah's hope for a child draws attention to the community dimension of the Covenant. When God reassured Abram that the divine promise would be fulfilled, the patriarch "put his faith in the Lord, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness" (Gn 15:6). This belief in God's word led Abram to prepare sacrificial offerings. He cut the animals in half and laid them so that there was a path between them. He knew that in a treaty or covenant ceremony the weaker or subordinate party would walk between the pieces and recite an oath. "This is what will happen to me if I break the terms of the treaty" (see Jer 34:18). But Abraham fell asleep and realized that *God* passed between the pieces! Such was the irrevocable commitment that God made with the chosen people, with the promise of a land wherein they would be free to serve him. The first level of the divine plan was completed as Israel was rescued from Egyptian slavery and convoked at Mount Sinai to become a nation.

Again God would manifest the divine presence to Moses and to the entire people of Israel (Ex 19:20 and 24). Centuries later, when Elijah despaired of his fate as a prophet, God called him to Mount Sinai (also known as Mount Horeb) to strengthen his commitment (see 1 Kg 19:8-18).

The evangelists remark frequently that Jesus spent hours in deep prayer; on two occasions the three "favorite" disciples were invited to participate in this experience. The Transfiguration was meant to prepare them so that their faith would stand the shock of Gethsemane and the crucifixion.

The first three Gospels state that Moses and Elijah appeared and conversed with Jesus. They had encountered the God of Abraham at Sinai so were credible witnesses that Jesus was to continue and fulfil the covenant. What did they discuss? St. Luke satisfies something of our curiosity. "They appeared in glory and spoke of his *exodos* (departure) which he was about to fulfil in Jerusalem" (9:31).

Do you recall sleeping through a significant event? The Apostles cannot remain alert, either here or at Gethsemani. However, they awakened in time to realize that *they* were taken into the mystery of God's presence (symbolized by the cloud). Then they heard the most important witness: "This is my Son, my Chosen One. Listen to him!" (9:35).

"The Church professes that all of Christ's faithful, who as people of faith are children of Abraham, are included in the same patriarch's call and that the salvation of the Church is prefigured mystically in the exodus of God's chosen people from the land of bondage" (Vatican II, *Declaration on Non-Christian Religions* #4). These themes will return often as the Church leads us into Holy Week and the Paschal Vigil. The challenge is to watch and pray. This year we hope to be more alert and appreciative of the gifts of faith!