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Winter 2008

Celebrant's Guide and Commentary and Reflections for Sundays and Festivals (February 17, 2008)

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

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SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT
February 17, 2008

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INTRODUCTION TO THE MASS

During life's pilgrimage we should recall the past and look forward to the final goal, our ultimate communion with God. So today the Church presents God's call of Abram and Sarah and the sign of Jesus' risen glory for three disciples. We ask to know our roots and to orient ourselves toward Holy Week and Easter.

INVITATION TO REPENTANCE

Aware of God's call, we acknowledge our weakness and failings. Our efforts to repent for past sins must be linked to the healing gift of the Lamb of God.

Lord Jesus, you came to bring the nations into the family of Abraham, Lord have mercy.
You strengthen us through your word and Sacrament, Christ have mercy.
You will return to bring salvation to all who are faith-filled, Lord have mercy.

HEADING FOR THE READINGS

First Reading (Gen 12:1-4). God called Abram and Sarah to embark on a journey of faith. He promised that this faith would transform the lives of "all the families of the earth."

Second Reading (2 Tim 1:8-10). The sharing in Baptism of divine gifts that culminate in salvation must be rooted in the work of Jesus who responded faithfully to the Father's call.

Gospel (Mt. 17:1-9). A glimpse of Christ's glory was intended to prepare the favorite Apostles for the agony of Gethsemane and the Cross. Like Abram, they were challenged: "Rise and do not be afraid" (Mt 17:7).

PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

President: Lord our God, your call is accompanied by abundant gifts and blessings. Asking that our fears and failings not be obstacles to your plan, we humbly present these petitions.

Reader:

May the response of Pope Benedict and all bishops to the Master's call be faithful and courageous, we pray to the Lord.

May all preachers and teachers of the Gospel draw strength from the presence of Christ in the Church today, we pray to the Lord.

May the reconciling power of the sacrament of penance touch the lives of those most in need of spiritual healing, we pray to the Lord.

May the elderly recognize their potential for continuing witness to the Gospel through acts of charity, we pray to the Lord.

For all those who died in war and violence be granted eternal peace, we pray to the Lord.

President: Lord, may we be witness of your glory in the midst of trials and struggles in our lives. We present these petitions in a spirit of faith and confidence, through Christ our Lord.

INTRODUCTION TO THE LORD'S PRAYER

United with Christ the great High Priest, we pray in the words he taught us.

INVITATION TO THE SIGN OF PEACE

Christ calls us to depart from any situation of selfishness and complacency to become peacemakers. Share a sign of the peace brought by the Lamb of God.

COMMUNION REFLECTION

Through the Eucharist Christ nourishes us for the pilgrimage of life. With Peter we rejoice: "Lord, it is good that we are here!" May we respond to his call to a life of generous service of our neighbor.

COMMENTARY

First Reading (Gen 12:1-4). Why did God call Abram to leave the security of his homeland? Before the time of Jesus, Jewish teachers maintained that Abram had rejected the idolatry of his father and had irked his kin. A fresh start would provide the context for further manifestations of the divine will. Eventually Abram's faith would be rewarded and would bring blessings for the nations of the world. Incredible as the promises seemed, Abram and Sarah ventured forth. "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance..." (Heb 11:8).

Responsorial Psalm (Ps 33:4-5, 18-22). Those who pray this psalm may know more about God than Abram did, but they (and we) call upon him, "our help and our shield" because God is the shield of Abram (Gen 15:1).

Second Reading (2 Tim 1:8-10). Before time began God the Father planned the work of deliverance, the triumph of life and faithfulness over death and dissolution. The apex of the pilgrimage of faith came with the manifestation of our Savior, Christ Jesus, whose Death-and-Resurrection brings a new hope to the world.

Gospel (Mt 17:1-9). Special privileges may come to those from whom much is expected. Did these Apostles realize *why* they were favored by Jesus? He had warned them of his impending trials and sufferings (Mt 16:21-23). On a mountain that should have reminded them of Mount Sinai, they experienced their Master's future glory. Moses and Elijah were seen to be conversing with Jesus. Rather than intrude upon the sublime conversation, Peter tried *to do something* so that the trio would remain there. The word interpreting the scene came not from the prophets or Jesus, but a heavenly voice proclaimed the same message as at Jesus' baptism (Mt 3:17); this was followed by the command: "Listen to him!" (Mt 17:5). To know what to *do* in the service of Jesus, Peter (and we) must listen to the totality of his message.

REFLECTION

The texts that the Church has chosen from Genesis and Matthew's Gospel seem to complement each other, while reminding us that the work of Jesus continues the divine plan that began with the call of Abram. Does some aspect of our life seem to thrust us into the unknown? If God's will may at times seem obscure to us, consider the elderly couple Abram and Sarai! God invited them to leave their homeland and its security for a destination that would be shown to them only at a later date. The promise of a great name and destiny comes to us as well; however, we know that the name is Christian and the goal is union with God the Father through Jesus. The content of our faith is much more complete than theirs. So that we will not grow discouraged in our pilgrimage, the Gospel offers a glimpse of Jesus in his risen glory.

To face suffering and the mystery of death, we need to prevent the vision of faith from growing dim. So Jesus took the three disciples who would be close to him in Gethsemani to a high mountain where they received a luminous insight into his majesty. The vision was interpreted by the Father's commendatory message: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him" (Mt 17:5).

The account of the Transfiguration in the Gospels states that Moses and Elijah appeared and conversed with Jesus. From the time of Origen in the third century, scholars understood these great leaders of Israel to represent "the Law and the Prophets", two of the three components of the Hebrew Scriptures. This interpretation is incorporated into the preface of this Sunday. While it is true that the totality of the Scriptures bears witness to God's plan in the work of Jesus (see Lk 24:44), Moses and Elijah serve another purpose as well. They both experienced the God of Israel on the height of Mount Sinai (also known as Horeb). Moses is *the* great prophet of ancient Israel and Elijah was like him in many ways, so they should be seen as the great teachers of unwavering fidelity to God's will who were introduced into the divine mystery in a very profound manner (see Ex 33:7-34:9 and 1 Kgs 19:9-18). Who would be better witnesses to the identity of Jesus?

In the Scriptures the cloud is often a symbol of God's presence, appropriate because it is visible yet impenetrable. The apostles are drawn under the protective shadow of this cloud and are overawed by the voice of the Father. As yet they are unaware that they will be called as well to stand in the shadow of the cross. Would they recall this privileged moment as they were invited to join Jesus at prayer in the garden? The evangelists give no indication of this; the Apostles would understand the meaning of the Transfiguration and Gethsemani only after the Son of Man was raised from the dead. During the agony and trials of Jesus it seems that they did not perceive the light of the resurrection nor remember the transfiguration. Again, for the moment, the content of our faith is more complete than theirs.