

Seton Hall University

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Celebrant's Guide and Commentary and Reflections for Sundays and Festivals (March 11, 2007)

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

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March 11, 2007

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INTRODUCTION TO THE CELEBRATION

Rhythms of self-discipline and feasting help Christians to experience the integration of our lives into the Paschal Mystery (death-and-resurrection) of Jesus. Our focus on worship in Lent should be on God's call for a change of heart so that we may serve him..

PENITENTIAL RITE

Personal efforts toward purification during Lent make us appreciate Christ's redemptive work more deeply. Renewed acknowledgement of our sinfulness prepares for assimilation of Christ's blessings.

Lord Jesus, you renew the gift of forgiveness for us. Lord have mercy.

Lord Jesus, your triumph brings us right relationship with the Father. Christ have mercy.

Lord Jesus, your risen life is our hope. Lord have mercy.

HEADINGS FOR THE READINGS

First Reading (Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15). Moses experienced God's presence as the foundation for his mission to rescue the Israelites from slavery. In the freedom of their own land they would serve God alone

Second Reading (1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12). The history of Israel provides insights into human limitations and God's way of leading his people to a maturing fidelity

Gospel (Luke 13:1-9). Jesus warned against facile judgment that the woes of others are a sign of divine punishment. Think instead of the need for repentance that everyone should acknowledge.

PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

President: We will renew our baptismal commitment and rejoice in gifts which enrich us for life eternal. Amid trials and challenges of daily life, we present petitions for the Church and all peoples.

Reader(s):

May Pope Benedict and all teachers in the Church proclaim the risen Lord as the source of our hope and joy, we pray to the Lord.

May the leaders of nations foster laws and practices that foster justice and peace.

May people in war zones in various lands be led to safety and security by true peacemakers.

May the faith of all Christians be renewed through worship and daily prayer.

May all who have died be rewarded for their faith and good deeds.

President: Father of mercy, we rejoice in the resurrection of your Son. May all the faithful be enriched with blessings that can be shared with those searching for your plan in their lives. We offer these prayers through the same Christ our Lord.

INVITATION TO THE LORD'S PRAYER

As we respond to the Father's call to imitate Jesus, we pray in the words he taught us:

INVITATION TO THE SIGN OF PEACE

As risen Lord, Jesus brought his gift of peace to the Church. May our sharing of this gift bring tranquility and order to our world.

INVITATION TO HOLY COMMUNION

At each Mass we unite ourselves with Christ the high priest to guide our world to its goal. May all who receive the risen Lord in this Eucharist be enriched for the service that completes their vocation.

COMMUNION REFLECTION

The renewal of our baptismal promises will culminate our Lenten observance, and each day we hear the challenge to mature in faith and service. We look to the risen Lord for guidance and strength. May his nourishing presence in Holy Communion uplift us in the midst of daily trials.

COMMENTARY

First Reading (Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15). In the ancient past the deities of a given country were considered supreme, so immigrants would adopt the names of the gods in the place to which they came. The exception was the people of Israel. However, there was a change of dynasties, so the Pharaoh did not remember Joseph (Ex 1:8) and began to persecute and enslave the Israelites. Moses was adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter, so he was educated in the way that prepared him for a future mission. However, his first effort to defend his people by violent means was a failure (Ex 2:11-15). Years later, after he had matured in a foreign land God called him to deliver all who groaned under bondage (Ex 2:23-25).

The pattern for a call to be a prophet involved a divine intervention in a time of Israel's need (see Jer 1:1-10; Ez 1:1-3:15). Moses was drawn by something strange about the burning bush but the word of God overwhelmed him. Fascination and awe go together in any authentic experience of God's presence. God bemoaned the suffering of Abraham's descendants and was going to deliver them from servitude so that they would be free to serve him in their own land.

The mission seemed to be beyond Moses' ability, so he objected (Ex 3:11; see Jer 1:6). The answer is always an assurance of divine help: "I will be with you" (Ex 3:12, see Jer 1:8). This is the background for the ancient Jewish interpretation of the sacred Name "I am who I am" as a declaration "I am present with you." Since the Middle Ages both Jewish and Christian scholars have marveled on the

metaphysical implications of a title for the Supreme Being. However, the God of Israel is remembered throughout all generations as Deliverer and Bestower of gifts (Ex 3:15).

Psalm (103:1-4, 6-7, 8, 11). Like many liturgical texts, this psalm draws upon the second revelation of the divine Names to Moses (Ex 34:6-7). The thirteen attributes listed there may be summarized in the statement “God is love” (see 1 Jn 4:8-16).

Second Reading (1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12). Both Jewish and Christian teachers emphasized the need for self-discipline in regard to food, drink and sexual desires. Because the Greeks knew that self-control was necessary for prowess in sports, St. Paul used athletic activities as a basis for this point. Corinthian Christians and Paul himself would overcome temptation and lethargy by asceticism (1 Cor 9:24-27).

The second way to present this teaching presupposed a good knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures, in this case the Books of Moses. No doubt they had heard passages of these books proclaimed in worship. So Paul developed themes that were part of his preaching. These narratives are not just ancient history; their preservation in God’s Word is “for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Cor 10:11).

The typological approach developed in the later chapters of Isaiah became a common method for conveying the lessons of history. Persons, places and events of the past were meaningful for their own time and in themselves but they were a basis for interpreting later events. Thus the prophet who encouraged the Jews in Babylonian exile to hope for divine help would pray in terms evocative of the Exodus (see Isaiah 51:9-10). In a similar way, St. Paul reminded his community that the ancient Israelites were their spiritual ancestors, initiated into intimacy with God through a “baptism” which prepared them to eat “spiritual” food and to drink “spiritual” water. Under threat of murderous rebellion by a thirsty crowd, Moses’ appeal to God was heard; from the unlikely rock came forth an abundant stream (Ex 17:1-6; Num 20:2-13). As with other memories of the desert wandering (see Deut 8:4; Wis Sol 16:20) later tradition recalled the gift of water as a constant sign of God’s presence, pointing to the benefits of the final age. In humility Christians must acknowledge the potential of human weakness to invade the lives of the faithful. Knowing the history of past ages we strive to excel in our response of faith to God’s sacramental gifts.

Gospel (Luke 13:1-9). The human tendency to dig into the past of those who have suffered tragedy is shown by some people listening to Jesus. He could read hearts so he could satisfy their curiosity! But Jesus pointed rather to the universal human need for a change of heart. Divine judgment is not exercised capriciously or arbitrarily. In the two cases cited, human brutality or engineering misjudgment would be explanations for the death of these unfortunate people.

This Gospel passage in the season of Lent challenges the Christian community to think about the call to repentance (a change of heart or attitude) that was fundamental to the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus (see Lk 3:7-14), even though Luke’s portrayal of the Lord first makes this precise point here. The challenge, “Repent or you will all likewise perish” (Lk 13:3,5), is intended to exhort people so that they will examine their *own* conscience and respond to God’s gifts. However, the curiosity returned when a person asked: “Lord will those who are saved be few?” (Lk 13:23). To this Jesus again exhorted the disciples to strive for entry into God’s kingdom by the narrow door/gate (see Mt 7:13-14; Jn 10:7).

Will we have time to reform our lives? The parable about the unfruitful fig tree draws attention to God's patience yet warns against presumption. When wondering about a wayward neighbor, we should consider that God's grace is at work and should be productive when the person becomes open to divine gifts. With regard to ourselves, we should not dally, for two reasons. First, no one knows the time of death and personal judgment. Second, gratitude for the abundance of blessings in our lives should bring an ever more fervent response.

REFLECTION

"O world invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!" (Francis Thompson, 1859-1907)

Like the English poet, who knew the sufferings of an alienated humanity, the Church in her worship celebrates the "world" that is the mystery of God. This is utterly beyond our human capacity to attain should we rely on our own efforts; we experience the divine because God seeks us and teaches us. "All things betray thee, who betrayest Me!"

The condescension of "the Hound of Heaven" in pursuing weak human beings is portrayed marvelously in the call of Moses. What better way could there be to experience God's simplicity? Moses is drawn by a strange phenomenon of nature, the burning bush, and then hears the divine Word addressing him by name. More attuned to the divine order than the other senses, our hearing grants us an awareness of the suspense of being time-bound. Perhaps we may perceive reality instantaneously by sight, but how often we are deceived! On the other hand, listening requires a span of attention for understanding. Moses learned first to revere the sacred nature of his encounter and then to present his mission in light of this experience. God sanctifies whatever is touched by his presence, so the very ground is holy.

The privilege of knowing God is never limited to the individual but provides the basis for a mission. "I will send you to Pharaoh to lead my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt" (Ex 3:10). No one feels adequately equipped for collaborating with God. In fact, the acknowledgement of human weaknesses becomes the opening through which the divine glory shines. The key to success is not human prowess or wisdom but the assurance that "God is with you" (Ex 3:12).

The name manifests the person, so Hebrew culture attached great importance to knowledge of God's Name. "The God of your ancestors" (3:13) harks back to the initial identification that Moses has been called by the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (3:6). The new name revealed to Moses is derived from the verb "to be", emphasizing that *God is present* to sustain his people. The statement "I am who am" became the basis for the specially sacred Name YHWH, vocalized by scholars as "Yahweh." In the Jewish tradition and in the New Testament circumlocutions such as "Lord" substituted for this Name. Awe for this and other divine names should permeate the Christian tradition as well. It was an unfortunate effort of scholars to give a Hebrew "flavor" to their translations that led to the frequent use of "Yahweh" in biblical readings and hymns. Casual use of divine titles shows insensitivity to the divine presence in our midst.

The tendency to speculate that those who suffer premature death must be sinners is criticized by Jesus (Lk 13:1-5). We are all in need of repentance for our sins and are called to turn to God. The two examples cited by Jesus involve human violence or negligence. How many times people blame God

when the free will of others should bear responsibility! In many situations it seems better not to place blame on a family member or neighbor, so we lash out at God. The Lord knows that people perhaps could not face a brutally honest evaluation of a given situation. So we formulate our anguish in a "prayer of protest". A calmer, more objective view of the problem should lead to repentance and forgiveness. The marvelous patience of God with his creatures is described by a parable. Just as a gardener does not give up easily, so Jesus wants us to realize God's mercy towards those who do not yet produce fruit. However, this should not lead to nonchalance! We look to past history, especially in the Scriptures, for patterns that help us to make sense out of life. "These things happened to them as an example, and they have been written down as a warning to us..." (1 Cor 10:11).