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Celebrant's Guide and Commentary and Reflections for Sundays and Festivals (March 21, 2010)

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

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March 21, 2010

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INTRODUCTION TO MASS

The first gesture when a Catholic enters a church reminds the person of our human need for divine forgiveness and of our Baptism. The sign of the cross with holy water expresses our faith in the work of Jesus in the mystery of his death-and-resurrection.

INVITATION TO REPENT

In Baptism our life was ordered to the service of God the Father through Christ's priesthood. For any ways in which our intimacy with God has been marred through sins, we ask pardon.

Lord Jesus, you bring the forgiveness of sin. Lord, have mercy.

Christ Jesus, you restore your people to holiness, Christ, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, you nourish us with your Word and sacraments. Lord, have mercy.

HEADING FOR THE READINGS

First Reading (Isa 43:16-21). Just as God rescued Israel from Egyptian slavery, so will he restore the remnant in Babylonian servitude to his service in the promised land.

Second Reading (Phil 3:8-14). Perseverance during times when we share in Christ's sufferings is a divine gift for which we pray. By looking ahead to the power of his resurrection we hope for the strength to live our faith.

Gospel (Jn 8:1-11). The human tendency to judge others by their failure to keep the commandments is challenged by Jesus. Have we first examined our own conscience and acknowledged our need for divine mercy?

PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

President: Though Baptism Christ made us children of his Father. We ask for the blessings needed by the Church to live faithfully in the service of God and neighbor.

Reader(s):

May Pope Benedict and all Bishops interpret the Gospel for the needs of our time and mediate Christ's forgiveness.

May all Christians grow in faithful adherence to Christ's gifts and share them with others.

May all who suffer because of conflict and violence be granted peace and tranquility.

May those preparing for Baptism in the Easter Vigil be filled with hope.

May all who have died recently, especially those who were alone, receive the gift of eternal life.

President: Eternal Father, your Son brought forgiveness and peace to the world through his offering on the Cross. May Christians come to imitate his goodness and love in times of trial so that they may share in his triumph over death.

INTRODUCTION TO THE LORD'S PRAYER

In Gethsemane Jesus prayed to do his Father's will, so we unite our prayers to his :

INVITATION TO THE SIGN OF PEACE

Jesus achieved peace for the Church at great cost. May we become instruments of his gift by deeds that manifest his love.

COMMENTARY REFLECTION

Heavenly Father, may Lenten prayer and penance bring us closer to your Son in his sufferings so that we will be patient in trial and generous in our service of neighbor. Renewed by this Eucharistic Sacrifice, may we be aware of Christ's presence with us throughout each day.

COMMENTARY

First Reading (Is 43:16-26). The Babylonian Exile seemed to be the nadir of Israelite history, yet the prophet instructed the people to use their opportunity to promote faith in the one God. "You are my witnesses, says the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen" (Is 43:10). They should proclaim the wonderful history of their liberation from Egypt and hope that God would rescue them from their present straits and restore them to their own land. Then they would be able to fulfill their calling to praise the Lord. This is the fundamental dimension of the Christian vocation, to praise God the Father through our union with Christ.

Responsorial Psalm (Ps 126:1-6). Through many generations after the Temple was rebuilt, pilgrims prayed this psalm in Jerusalem. Pagan neighbors acknowledged God's marvels: "The Lord has done great things for them!" May those who suffer hardship be assured that God will bring them home!

Second Reading (Phil 3:8-14). Paul argued vigorously against those Christians who required that male converts be circumcised (3:2-3). This was the first step toward righteousness under the Law on the part of those who did not stress God's prior call to the covenant, which requires a response in faith (Gen 15:6). God's call to faith brought Paul a personal knowledge (or experience) of Christ as Lord in the mystery of his death-and-resurrection. This transformation from death to eternal life must become the pattern for every Christian, sharing his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, to attain the resurrection from the dead. This should be a central focus for our Lenten journey.

Gospel (Jn 8:1-11). The fourfold Gospel is drawn from a larger context of oral teachings in the infant Church. This passage is a gem that a scribe inserted into the context of Jesus' teaching that he judges no one (8:15, see 3:17; 12:47). Some ancient manuscripts placed this story after Lk 21:38, which describes Jesus teaching in the Temple early in the morning. Certainly, Luke portrayed Jesus as sensitive to the plight of women. The Law of Moses prescribed the death penalty for both parties (Det 22:22-23) but in this case only the woman was apprehended. In courts the judges of Israel assumed a role of service to the community that inspired awe. "You are gods, Sons of the Most High, all of you; nevertheless, you shall die like men..." (Ps 82:6-7). This role of collaboration with God should bring the judge to examine his conscience; thus did Jesus challenge the accusers and refrained from condemning the woman. However, his forgiveness was accompanied by a call to repentance and conversion.

REFLECTION

The structure of Jewish and Christian liturgy includes the dimension of history at the core of every celebration. Only by understanding our roots in the past manifestations of God to his people can we express trust that divine goodness shapes our lives now. Only in knowing the pattern of divine action in the past can we hope for the triumph of God over evil now and in the future.

The teachers of the remnant who survived the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. knew that the people were devastated by their experience. They sought to rebuild the faith of Israel by assuring them that the Creator of the universe was the Lord who could redeem them from misery and slavery. The Lord himself declared: "I am the Lord, your holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King" (Is 43:15). At this time Israel lived among the Babylonians, who believed that creation resulted from the victory of their chief god, Marduk, over an evil dragon. Belief that creation was constituted from the tainted body of this dragon led to conclusions unacceptable to Israel. However, the myths of neighboring cultures had a powerful appeal! Thus, the prophets boldly adapted that myth to the historical order, so that its symbolism and power over the imagination could be utilized, yet neutralized.

The Exodus was such a momentous event in the history of Israel that it took on cosmic proportions for later generations. In prayer the desperate people called on God to awake and to act as in times long past to rescue Israel. "Was it not you who crushed Rahab (a monster, symbol of Egypt), who pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep... for the redeemed to pass over?" (Is 51:9-10).

In the passage read this Sunday, the victory over Pharaoh's army at the sea of reeds is recalled. Those who stubbornly opposed the divine plan for Israel were defeated in a decisive manner (see Ex 15:1-18 for the song celebrating this triumph). Through the prophet God promises an event that will be even more marvelous. The desert would be transformed so that the people could return without difficulty to the land where they could serve their God.

Although the people are told to forget the events of the past as insignificant compared with the future deliverance (Is 43:18), the Exodus remains for Jews and Christians as the paradigm from which all subsequent acts of redemption are understood. Thus the New Testament writers interpret the work of Jesus, especially his death-and-resurrection, in terms of exodus (Lk 9:31), the Passover Meal (Lk 22:7-12), the Lamb (Jn 1:29) and the unleavened bread (1 Cor 5:6-8).

St. Paul considered his knowledge or experience of Christ Jesus to surpass by far all God's other gifts. The entire purpose of life and the mystery of death itself must be understood in light of Christ's Paschal Mystery. To share the fullness of life, which is communion with the living God, the faithful unite with Christ's death; then they will participate in the resurrection of the dead (Phil 3:8-11).

John the Baptist and others expected the Messiah to vanquish evil in the world by an act of judgment before the Kingdom of God could be inaugurated (Lk 3:16-17, see Is 11:4). The Fourth Gospel makes a clear statement that Jesus came not to judge but to save the world (Jn 12:47), reserving judgment until the second coming. The case of the woman caught in adultery illustrates this salvific emphasis in Jesus' ministry. By outwitting the woman's accusers, Jesus delivered her from judgment in court and, in forgiving her sin, he challenged her to make a new response to life. The same mercy and forgiveness is extended to us during the season of Lent. Then we will be able to appreciate the Paschal Mystery more profoundly.