

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Mar 8th 2015

Lord, you have the words of everlasting life. (John 6:68c)

Jesus knew Chapter 58 of the book of the Prophet, Isaiah, which we read on the Friday and Saturday after Ash Wednesday. He knew that it was not sacrifices themselves that win God's favor. Now, in the temple, in the beginning of the Fourth Gospel, Jesus overturns the business of offering sacrifices to God. In this gospel, we will meet Jesus who is himself the one and only sacrifice of the new and everlasting covenant. Salvation is a gift. We do not earn it at all.

So, why do we pay attention to the Commandments of the Book of Exodus? Why are we on this Lenten journey? And what does it mean for us to do penance now?

The answer to these questions is found in the order of things, as gifts from God, and how grace (this gifting) works in our lives. Salvation - the victory God accomplishes over the power of sin and death itself - is a gift from God. To be precise, it is the gift won for each of us and we are free to embrace it or reject it. What we are trying to do by cooperating with the gift (God's grace) is to live the life of a grateful recipient of grace. If we move with the grace/gift we have received, then our hearts will, first of all, be filled with gratitude. Grateful hearts want to respond with love - to give thanks and praise, just as we say as we begin every Eucharistic Prayer: "it is right and just, our duty and our salvation, always and everywhere to give you thanks."

To the extent that our hearts are troubled, distracted, self-absorbed, or so divided that they are rebellious, we need to do things (acts of penance) to help us "turn back" to our Lord, with all our heart. Our desire in this Lenten journey is greater freedom - freedom to cooperate with, to respond to God's grace. The "work" of Lent is to discover where and in what concrete ways I'm not cooperating - where and when I'm resisting the gift that God is giving me in Jesus. When I don't want to honor our God, or when I am aggressive or covetous (desiring what is not mine or what is not good for me), then I'm out of balance and I can be quite closed to the love God wants to give me, in the form of new and everlasting life.

Lent is for freedom - freedom to make my heart like his. It is about freedom to give my life away. It is the process of practicing habits of thinking about the needs of others, before going after my needs first.

So, at the end of this forty day journey, the goal is not how many sacrifices I made, but how free I have become. We'll know this tree by its fruit. Who in my family is sensing that I'm less angry or selfish? Who senses I'm softer and more compassionate? Who would say that I'm seeming to be more generous and self-sacrificing? Ultimately, how have I grown in compassion for the poor and those on the margins of society? How have I thought about being their advocate in helping dismantle the unjust social structures which bind them in poverty and despair? What is different in my behavior, and shows how I've cooperated with grace? What is going to last?

What am I doing with the remaining weeks of Lent? Whatever will help these kinds of graces grow in me. Asking for them with deeper and deeper desiring. Finding ways to say "no" to past habits and to practice new ones. Giving thanks and praise when the grace comes. Feeling and celebrating how freedom and fidelity to the law of the Lord brings the gift of life.

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