

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Mar 9th 2017

I love Psalm 51. I grew up singing:

“create in me a clean heart O’ God, and renew a right spirit within me.

Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with your free Spirit”

at the time the offering was presented at the altar. In the readings for today, we find it prayed before the reading of the Gospel message. In the first instance, I was thinking about Psalm 51 in terms of presenting our gifts to God out of a spirit of humility and repentance. Today we are asked to think about receiving God’s gifts to us in the spirit of humility and repentance. And further, what does humility and repentance have to do with turning our mourning into gladness and our sorrows into wholeness? Queen Esther speaks these poetic words out of great anguish and a trusting faith that demonstrates great humility. Esther trusts that God will give her the words to speak that will deliver her and her people from their enemies. Like Esther, we too know the stories of our forefathers in the faith and how they were given the strength and courage to prevail in the midst of their enemies.

But I don’t think the Old Testament is about triumph over enemies. Nor do I think that we should see God’s kindness and truth in our own lives as a winning streak or a sense of being in the right. If so, we should repent of our self-righteousness and arrogance. When God answers us, as we read again in Psalm 138, I think it is to strengthen our faith. It seems to me that God gives us strength to restore our confidence in God’s kindness and truth, and in the joy of our salvation. When God answers us, God renews a right spirit within us. And, allowing ourselves to be changed and renewed is an act of humility and repentance.

As I reflect on all the anguish diaries of the Old Testament, I see a common pattern that I find instructive to my own faith. The faithful in these accounts are not praising God for victories over or escapes from their enemies, although there is plenty of that. Rather, they are praising God for the kindness and truth of God’s greatness. In Psalm 138, we read that David was so certain of God’s greatness to complete what God had done for him, that he saw the answer to his prayer in God’s enduring kindness and truth in his life.

Jesus also reminds us in the Gospel of Mark that whenever we ask for anything, we should ask it with faith in God’s enduring kindness. We can ask for anything because God is kind to us as God’s children. But Jesus quickly turns this lesson to a stern admonishment. If God loves us more than we love our own children, and we certainly know how to give them good gifts, why can’t we do the same for others? Are they not also the children of God? Did not Jesus die for all of God’s children? Praying for a clean heart and a renewed spirit as I reflect on this Gospel message is a good Lenten discipline for me. I pray that we may all be restored in the joy of our salvation and upheld by the Holy Spirit as God creates in us a clean heart and renews a right spirit within us.

