

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Mar 5th 2013

“Azariah stood up in the midst of the fire and prayed aloud...” Daniel 3:25.

Sometimes we find ourselves in the midst of fire. These verses in Daniel, which are part of the Catholic canon of scripture, provide an astonishing example of a faith in the midst of a trial, which is inspired by an encounter with God. It has much to offer us in our Lenten journey.

I have always loved this story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (aka Azariah). When presented with demands from unjust laws, they stood up to mighty King Nebuchadnezzar and calmly resolved to resist. They told the king that God could save them if He wished, but if He did not, it would not affect their decision to refuse to worship a false god. The king is angry and offended, so he has them thrown into a fiery furnace. That decision kills some other people, but not our three friends. They were joined in the furnace by what the king described as a “fourth man”. (Country music fans of a certain age may recall the Statler Brothers singing this story, “they didn’t bend, they didn’t bow, they didn’t burn”.)

When you consider this context, the prayer offered by Azariah (Abednego) is really astonishing. He does not call for divine retribution on the Babylonian oppressors, who surely had some serious sins to their account. Instead, Azariah focuses on the faults of his own people and their corporate need for divine mercy. The faults of others (as grievous as they were, indeed) apparently did not seem so important when Azariah encountered the “fourth man” -- a theophany -- in the midst of this fiery trial.

Following God makes a lot of sense when you are in the fire and need to get out, but then there is always the question: what are you going to do next, after the crisis? Sometimes deliverance is not sufficiently transformative of our attitude and way of life. The Gospel today provides a severe object lesson about deliverance and the requirement of something from us -- forgiveness. In the parable, the debtor who was forgiven much fails to forgive another debtor -- and his own deliverance was therefore withdrawn. Yikes!

As we sit comfortably at a distance, we can wonder what this debtor was thinking and why he was so dense. But if we had been in the midst of that adventure, could we be so sure of ourselves? If we were the debtor who had been mistreated over our small debt, would we be glad that the other fellow was getting his due for bullying us? What about our dignity, which has been offended by this brute? Would we want justice more than mercy?

Sometimes cycles of affliction and injury are hard to stop. We get hurt, then we hurt others, and then they hurt others, etc. But we must stop them. This seems to be a supernatural quest, which is not so easily achieved on our own terms. While we may know that “[love] does not brood over injury” (1 Cor. 13:5), practicing that kind of love is asking quite a lot, when the hurt is real and we do not feel fine at all!

During this Lenten season, how can we find the kind of prayer that arose in Azariah’s heart – and the transforming change in attitude that accompanied it? Perhaps we may find such prayer by spending more time with our Lord than we spend brooding over our injuries and our neighbor’s faults (though indeed they are real and many). May God help us to perform this supernatural work. And I suspect we will be astonished at the results if we try. Thanks be to God.

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