

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Mar 20th 2013

A sinkhole beneath a house in Florida opens, and the sleeping homeowner disappears underground forever. The seemingly solid earth was an illusion. In a rather difficult teaching in today's Gospel, Jesus rejects "those Jews who believed in him." He tells them, "The truth will set you free." They ask, "How can you say 'You will become free'?" An expert teacher, Jesus knows from their questioning that their apparent faith is an illusion. Complacently sure that as descendents of Abraham they don't really commit sins, are certainly not "enslaved" by sin, they haven't really heard Jesus. In fact, he knows that at least some of them, afraid that his teaching will upset their comfortable positions in society, will actually conspire to have the Roman authorities put him to death. And for you and me, on this Lenten Wednesday, Good Friday draws near.

But there's hope for us in this Gospel excerpt too. Our 21st century understandings of human psychology explain further how "everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin." Today we know a lot about alcoholism and other physical addictions, and about psychological addictions to behaviors like gambling or shopping or risk-taking that can become compulsive and destructive. They can enslave us. Christian teachings about contrition for sin tell us that we're all slaves to certain bad habits, tendencies and attitudes. Lent is a good time to consider how addicted (enslaved) we may be to our public image and honors, to hatred and fears, to needless anxieties, angers and resentments, to greed, sloth and selfish desires. Today's Gospel gives us the promise of freedom. We believe in Jesus's word: "I came from God and am here." We believe in that Truth that sets us free.

Meanwhile, today's liturgical readings start with joy in the first reading and responsorial psalm. Both are from the third chapter of the book of Daniel, although some of us use Bible versions in which Daniel is much shorter than in the standard "Catholic" version. Thus some may not see in mid-chapter the long "Song of the Three Jews" as the section is headed in the edition I've been using. But I think all versions of the Old Testament in use today include the marvelous story of these three young men known as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, those wonderful names given to them in the court of Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar.

The young men sing their long hymn of praise to the one God of the Israelites, and refuse to worship Nebuchadnezzar's god. Pushed into a fantastically hot furnace, they live to demonstrate the saving power of God. Where three men fell into the furnace, four are seen walking around within the flames. And that "fourth looks like a son of God." I know commentators and artists through the ages have interpreted the fourth as an angel, sometimes as Michael the Archangel, but I like to think that this is an image of Jesus Christ walking with these three men, faithful descendents of Abraham. Yes, the miraculous story takes place centuries before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth in history, but it also represents, to me, Christ with us in the middle of our trials and dangers, present because these people

believe in the Father who sends the Son.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego don't know if they will be saved from death in the furnace, although they know God could save them if He so wished. They only know their faith in God, the Truth that sets them free. My own faith tells me that Truth may free us from the fire of hatred and violence, the ice of selfishness, resentment, loneliness and despair. Thus the psalm's refrain on this Wednesday in Lent: "Glory and praise for ever!"

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