

"Go and Sin No More"

March 13, 2016

Fifth Sunday of Lent
Readings: Isaiah 43.16-21;
Philippians 3.8-14; John 8.1-11**By Rev. Bevil Bramwell, O.M.I.**

In the flurry of our lives, with all the struggle to put food on the table, get the kids to school, and accomplish all we need to at work, the vast spiritual side of our lives can very easily get pushed aside. The readings today attempt to reconnect us – if we are willing – to one particular mystery in the spiritual dimension of life.

A New Creation

The first reading today is taken from the book of the prophet Isaiah. This oracle comes right after God's announcement of the coming of the Suffering Servant and God's hopes for the refounding of Israel. Today God says: "Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; see, I am doing something new!" After all the failures of the people of Israel in the past, he himself is going to do something dramatically new by manifesting his Suffering Servant. God was going to forget the failings and sins of the past and press on to make a new creation.

And then God explains why he is doing this: "I put water in the desert and rivers in the wasteland for my chosen people to drink, the people whom I formed for myself, that they might announce my praise." He has formed a chosen people who shall have the resources for life, and they shall live to praise God. This recreation of humanity would restore its original nature, of which we have images in the earlier scriptures. We have man walking with God in the garden (Genesis), and we have God meeting his people in the Tent of Meeting in the story of the Exodus. In experiences such as these, God related personally to his people. God was working to restore the communal nature of humanity as well. He was building a community that could worship together.

So our readings today begin with the wonder of a generous God taking the initiative to communicate truth and life to his people! Then, responding to God's action, in our worship, in the responsorial psalm, we sing Psalm 126 together. The antiphon says it all: "The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy." God's promises are a part of our religious family history, and as we participate in the celebration of the Eucharist, we are seeing those promises come to fulfillment right here in the church at the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

The psalm wonderfully echoes this when we sing: "Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the torrents in the southern desert." This is the image that God had already used in the first reading. The rain brings growth and green grass! The psalmist has already celebrated the release of the captives from exile. There is such great promise in all this. The returning people can rebuild Jerusalem, the city that will become the center for salvation of all the nations.

With these images in mind we go to the second reading, which today comes from Paul's Letter to the Philippians. Paul "considers everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." In the time between the writing of the psalm and of this letter, God has sent his Christ. He has taken the initiative and started the new creation in him. One great follower of Christ, St. Paul, taught his followers that he had found the supreme good. He had found the Messiah of God. So he exhorted them: "Be found in him . . . that [leads to the righteousness] which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God." So, what Paul was saying – and is still saying in the Mass today – is that his faith (a grace from God) led to him being seen as righteous by God.

Righteousness is one of those much debated words in the scriptures. It means being set at rights with almighty God. One's sins have been wiped away. This point was already raised in the oracle in Isaiah: God said that what was past was past, thereby putting all the negative things Israel had done behind him and starting afresh.

Jesus' Two Points

Yet again, this theme comes out beautifully in today's gospel. What we hear about is God's great generosity, now expressed in one specific historical event in Jesus' life. Jesus did not judge the woman caught in adultery. He did, however, make two points. First, according to Jesus, the Son of God, what the woman had done in the past was truly past. He did not follow the severe application of the law that the mob of bystanders was hoping for. They wanted to stone her. Instead, here this man Jesus acted out a concrete instance of the new creation instituted by God so many years before.

This man, drawing in the dust in front of the mob, takes it upon himself to apply the mercy of God to this woman who had been brought to him for judgment. God is now on earth, and he is acting in this man, Jesus of Nazareth. Something had brought the mob to him. He had some kind of reputation and authority, otherwise they would not have bothered with him. But he extended the mercy of God rather than the full justice permitted by the law!

Fast-forward to when Jesus conferred the power to forgive sin, later in John's gospel, where we read: "Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven'" (John 20.22, 23). This gift continues for us in the Sacrament of Penance.

Returning to the mob scene, Jesus' second point (note how he consistently sets the rhythm of the exchange): He was not giving in to the false righteousness of the crowd. *He* has the authority – which is why they came to him in the first place. And so he told them: "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." The crowd dwindled: "They went away one by one, beginning with the elders."

Judgment and Mercy

Jesus struck a chord in their hearts. Behind all the fuss and feathers, they each knew a little something about their own hearts. The only sinless one in the whole episode is Jesus himself. And so he continued: "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" He was prepared to concede to the scribes and Pharisees if even one of them had not sinned, but each of them knew that they had. This is a momentous change in the history of the Jewish people. The immensely long history of fallible men and women exercising judgment and meting out punishment for sin has come to an end with the sinless Jesus.

From now on God will judge at the end of time in the Second Coming of Jesus. But from Jesus' first coming to his second is a time of *mercy*. The word means *compassion*. God recognizes the depth of his relation to us and what that relationship means. We are created as an act of love by God, and so we are accorded his mercy however much we sin.

Happily, we are now in the Jubilee Year of Mercy called by Pope Francis. The pope said at Mass on December 8, 2015, at the beginning of this Holy Year: "To pass through the Holy Door means to rediscover the infinite mercy of the Father who welcomes everyone and goes out personally to encounter each of them. It is he who seeks us! It is he who comes to encounter us! This will be a year in which we grow ever more convinced of God's mercy. How much wrong we do to God and his grace when we speak of sins being punished by his judgment before we speak of their being forgiven by his mercy (cf. St. Augustine, *De Praedestinatione Sanctorum*, 12, 24)! But that is the truth. We have to put mercy before judgment, and in any event God's judgment will always be in the light of his mercy. In passing through the Holy Door, then, may we feel that we ourselves are part of this mystery of love, of tenderness. Let us set aside all fear and dread, for these do not befit men and women who are loved. Instead, let us experience the joy of encountering that grace which transforms all things." All of the themes of today's readings resound in these words of the pope.

Lastly, we must remember Christ's admonition: "Go, and from now on do not sin anymore." That was his only condition. Sin still must be obliterated for the new People of God to come to fruition as the people for whom God can be the light in the New Jerusalem.

About the Author

Fr. Bevil Bramwell, OMI, teaches theology online at Catholic Distance University. His books are Laity: Beautiful, Good and True, The World of the Sacraments, and Catholics Read the Scriptures.

FOR FURTHER READING

Catechism of the Catholic Church, ##1422-1498, available at:
http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c2a4.htm

Francis, Homily, Holy Mass and Opening of the Holy Door (December 8, 2015), available at:
<https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies>

John Paul II, Homily, Pastoral Visit to the Parish of Our Lady of Suffrage and St. Augustine of Canterbury (April 1, 2001), available at:
<https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2001/documents/>

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Jubilee Year of Mercy," available at:
<http://www.migrate.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings>

IN SHORT . . .

- ***God promises to forget the failings and sins of the past and instead to press on to make a new creation.***
- ***Jesus did not follow the severe application of the law but rather acted out a concrete instance of the new creation instituted by God so many years before.***
- ***Jesus is the only sinless one, the only one with authority – which is why they came to him in the first place.***
- ***The long history of fallible men and women exercising judgment and meting out punishment for sin has come to an end with the sinless Jesus.***
- ***We have to put mercy before judgment, and in any event God's judgment will always be in the light of his mercy.***
- ***"Do not sin anymore" – that was the only condition. Sin still must be obliterated for us to become the people for whom God is the light in the New Jerusalem.***