

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year C

Fifth Sunday of Lent

First reading (Isaiah 43.16-21)

The New Exodus

During Lent we have been working through the story of Israel preparing - or being prepared - for the coming of Christ: Adam, Abraham, Moses, the monarchy, and now the promise of a new beginning. For that is what Easter is.

This part of Isaiah was written during the Exile of the Jews in Babylon, a traumatic event that seemed to them the end of all their hopes. Permanent exile and slavery, far from their beloved Jerusalem. 'There we sat and wept', says the Psalmist.

But the prophet whose work is attributed to Isaiah set out to re-energize them with the promise that they would return to Jerusalem, and that the wonders of the Exodus from Egypt would be renewed. No need to recall the past, for there would be a road across the desert and miraculous supplies of water for the travellers. The desert would bloom afresh (for the slightest supply of water brings the withered plants to life in the spring) and the curious beasts of the desert, jackals and ostriches, would praise the Lord.

There is a lesson for us, too. Our trust in God teaches us - and our own experience eventually grudgingly reinforces this - that seemingly total disaster can become a source of strength and instruction.

Question:

In what way would you wish to be transformed by the new beginning of Easter?

Second reading: (Philippians 3.8-14)

Pushing ahead for Olympic Gold

As we prepare for the celebration of the Passion next week, we read of Paul's own struggle, in the letter to his special friends at Philippi. He is tired, probably already quite senior, and longs to finish his race and be with Christ in tranquillity.

The games and athletic contests were the football tournaments of the ancient world. Corinth, where Paul spent so long, was the centre for the Isthmian Games, more important than the Olympics, and Paul often uses imagery of running and even boxing. He knows the thrill of the contest, but at the same time he recognizes that all our power comes from the Resurrection of Christ. Christ endured and was raised by the Father.

Often for us Christianity consists of enduring slights, insults or neglect and replying with a cheerful word or gesture that dissolves the hurt and seeks to renew friendship and genuine relationship. There is no need aggressively to turn the other cheek; it needs more of the courage of Christ to reply with a positive advance. If I can bring myself to ask, 'What would Jesus have done?' I am already sharing in his strength. The aggression of the athlete is redirected!

Question:

Apart from his suffering and death, what do you find most inspiring about Jesus' life story and his character as seen in the gospels??

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Gospel:

(John 8.1-11)

The Woman taken in Adultery

Why this reading from John in the middle of the Year of Luke? All the other gospels during this Lent have been from Luke. The answer is that it is an independent, floating story that does not fit the Gospel of John. In early manuscripts of the gospels, it floats around in various positions before it becomes anchored as an example of Jesus' saying just before, 'Our Law does not allow us to pass judgement on anyone without first giving him a hearing' (John 7.51).

It fits in this year because the tone of the story and the theme of welcome for the repentant sinner are both thoroughly Lukan, constantly stressed in Luke, for example, by the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

What did Jesus write on the ground, or was he just doodling to allow the accusers time to reflect on their self-righteousness? It is made clear throughout the Gospel of Luke that you cannot be a follower of Christ without first admitting your sinfulness. Peter in the boat tells Jesus to leave, for he is a sinner. Zacchaeus promises to make multiple restitution for his embezzlements. The woman at the supper weeps for her sins at Jesus' feet.

Question:

What do you think Jesus wrote on the ground? Would it sometimes be better to be less judgmental?
