

Commentary on Sunday Scripture Readings

First Sunday of Lent – Year B

First reading:

*The Covenant with Noah
(Genesis 9.8-15)*

Lent is a time when the first reading really comes into its own. On the Sundays of Lent the Church leads us step by step through the preparation of the People of God for the supreme event of Easter, the Resurrection of Christ. In each year of the three-year cycle of readings the first Sunday starts with the Bible story before Abraham. This year it is the promise to Noah that God will never again let a destructive flood devastate the earth. The first thing Noah does on emerging from the ark is to sacrifice to God in thanksgiving for his deliverance. To this God replies with his promise, guaranteed by the reassuring sign of the rainbow, which binds together earth and heaven, a sort of glorious pathway to heaven.

Each of the covenants God makes with his people emerges from evil. There is no pretence that we are not fallible, sinful human beings. Time after time the human partners fail and break the covenant. Time after time God forgives and offers a covenant again, until the new covenant in the blood of Christ. A good way to start Lent, acknowledging our sin and welcoming God's invitation to start again.

Question:

How can Noah's covenant help my Lent?

Second reading:

*The Pledge of a Good Conscience
(1 Peter 3.18-22)*

Lent reaches its climax with the renewal of our baptismal promises at the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday night. This reading begins to prepare for it. Noah's emergence to new life from the waters of the Flood (amid devastation and destruction) is compared to, or made a symbol of, emergence to new life from the waters of baptism. Water is the source of all life. Just look at the way people so often carry a little water bottle around with them! Although you don't really appreciate water as the source of life until you have been lost in the desert without any water, getting more and more desperately thirsty and weaker. See a drooping flower revive when it is given a few drops of water! The waters of baptism are a symbol not only of washing away sin, but more importantly of new life in Christ. To 'baptize' means to 'dip' in water. By baptism we are 'dipped' into Christ's death. We emerge from the water soaked through with the risen life of Christ, so that henceforth Christ is our life. The reading encourages us to prepare for the renewal of this life at Easter by getting our conscience in order. This needs thought, commitment and prayer, so that we are ready with 'the pledge of a good conscience'.

Question:

What are the great symbols of Lent? Is there any modern symbolism like water?

Gospel:

Jesus is Tested in the Desert
(Mark 1.12-15)

Each year the gospel reading for this Sunday is about Jesus' testing in the desert. Mark's emphasis is distinctly different from that of Matthew and Luke. No details of the testing, but rather Jesus' sojourn in the desert is rather almost a return to the peace of the Garden of Eden. The desert of Judea, between Jerusalem and the Jordan Valley, is a noble and dignified solitude of smooth, sandstone hills. Nothing grows, of course, but wild camels and the occasional leopard prowl around. There Jesus was 'with the wild animals' as, led by the Spirit, he made his preparation for his mission. In what way was he tested? We may presume that in

solitude and prayer he was working out the implications of the Voice from Heaven at his Baptism. How was he to run his course as the beloved Servant of the Lord? Precisely how was he to bring the presence Kingship of God into people's lives? The '40' is often used in biblical accounts for a period of preparation, as Israel's 40 years in the desert, or the apostles' 40 days of preparation between Easter and Ascension. We may use our 40 days to reflect on how we may bring God's presence to bear in and through our lives.

Question:

Is testing the most important aspect of Lent?

Second Sunday of Lent – Year B

First reading:

The Sacrifice of Isaac
(Genesis 22.1-2, 9-13, 15-18)

Every parent must be moved by this terrible and touching story. How could a parent do such a thing? And the boy was Abraham's last hope for the survival of his family, granted to him to fulfil God's promise. The narrative becomes slower as they approach the point. Note how Isaac is allowed to carry the wood, but Abraham carefully carries anything on which the child might hurt himself, the fire and the knife. One can imagine the jaunty boy trotting along beside dad, bouncing questions at him, and dad's monosyllabic answers as he nears the moment he dreads. Yet he trusted in God right up to the brink of disaster, somehow

confident that God would rescue him from this terrible deed. As Paul stresses, it was not anything Abraham did that justified him, not his obedient action, but his total trust in God. Can I claim such total trust in God's love?

The tradition of the Church sees in this tragic story a 'prequel' of God's offering his only, beloved Son for the salvation of the human race, a mysterious preparation for that supreme offering which we celebrate at Easter. The goal of this season of Lent is kept before our eyes as we advance along the way.

Question:

How could a loving father do this?

Second reading:

*Paul rejoices in God's love
(Romans 8.31-35, 37)*

Paul reflects on God's love: if God loved us sufficiently to deliver up his son for us, there is no limit to his love. Paul begins the letter by exposing the human race as mired in sin. Of this the sin, the disobedience of Adam - and 'Adam' means 'man' in Hebrew - is the symbol. Then Paul shows that the perfect, loving obedience of the Second Adam, Christ, to his Father unravels our disobedience, and set us steady again in God's love. The Cross is the supreme act of love: Jesus loves his Father even to death. God accepts this death out of love for the human race. Nothing, continues Paul, can separate us from this love, not life or death, not human or superhuman powers. As an example of this love, he then shows how even the Jews who rejected Jesus remain God's beloved people. In the end, they, too, will be saved by that love.

Question:

Do you see Christ's obedience as the heart of his sacrifice?

Gospel:

The Transfiguration
(Mark 9.2-10)

As the time of the Passion approaches the foreboding of the disciples grows. Jesus sustains them by this vivid experience of his more than natural nature. On the Holy Mountain of revelation, they see him transformed. It was a real visual experience, albeit described in symbols familiar from the Bible, brilliant white clothes and so on. Moses and Elijah are seen there because they also had experienced the vision of God on the Holy Mountain. For Moses, this was at the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai; for Elijah, in the cave of Mount Horeb. The disciples were frightened, confused and overcome at the awesome experience, and yet comforted in a way which made Peter want to prolong it. This will later be the rare reaction of Christian mystics, a reassuring terror and a frightening homeliness, the awareness of a presence that is at the same time awesome and comforting, an experience that cannot fully be put into words. The Voice from Heaven is an echo of the Voice at Jesus' Baptism. There, however, it was addressed to Jesus, whereas here it is spoken to the disciples, proclaiming Jesus as authorized teacher, the extension of that same divine voice.

Question:

Is fear the right attitude we should have to God?

Third Sunday of Lent – Year B

First reading:

*The Ten Commandments
(Exodus 20.1-17)*

The ten commandments are not harsh rules, but an invitation to Israel, showing them how to be God's people: if you wish to keep close to God, you must behave in a way compatible with God's own nature. They come in an order opposite to the priorities of the modern materialistic world, for God comes first, then values of persons, and values of things and possessions only at the end.

We need to think of them not as prohibitions but as expressing positive values. So 'keep holy the Sabbath day' implies freedom of worship and freedom for leisure. 'Honour your parents' includes not only obedience of children, but real parental care for children and of adult children for aged parents, as well as other family values. 'No adultery' means fostering the marriage bond and continually deepening it. 'No false evidence' includes the right to free speech, and a good reputation, free of slander, no brain-washing or distortion by school systems or by the media.

Many of these laws come in other ancient law codes, but in Israel they have a different meaning, for here they are the guidelines for living under divine protection and in the company of the Lord.

Question:

Is any of the ten commandments more important than the others?

Second reading:

*The Scandal of the Cross
(1 Corinthians 1.22-25)*

This reading is all about power and wisdom: 'The Jews demand miracles (works of power) and the Greeks look for wisdom.' These are two measures of success in the normal terms of our modern materialistic society. Power comes in the form of wealth, authority, command, being the boss. Wisdom results in the respect and reputation accorded to a person: he or she makes the right decisions. But where are these in the crucified Christ? He was a prisoner, powerless, horribly tortured, mocked and derided. He commanded nobody. There is no respecting a tortured prisoner. God's standards are different, and we heard them in the form of the commandments in the first reading. It was these standards that brought Jesus to the situation of the Passion, for these were the standards he had sought to live out and show to people by his way of living and acting. This was the Kingship of God which he came to proclaim and to spread. In the first reading, we heard the demanding, positive standards for membership of God's people. Now, in this second reading, we receive strength and comfort from the reassurance of the model of Christ, the only ideal of the Christian.

Question:

What are the qualities of true wisdom?

Gospel:

The Cleansing of the Temple
(John 2.13-25)

According to John, this scene took place at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, on the first of Jesus' four visits to Jerusalem. At each subsequent visit the Temple authorities lay in wait for Jesus, increasingly keen to eliminate him, but unable to do so until his hour had come. The other gospels place as the final climax both this incident and all other scenes of Jesus in Jerusalem. Whichever is correct, the incident is the basic cause of Jesus' arrest and tortured death. By his action, Jesus had demonstrated that the worship carried out in the Temple was vain in God's eyes and must be superseded. To the Temple authorities, this was

intolerable, and he must be removed. Again, Jesus demanded a complete reversal of standards. His puzzling saying about building the Temple anew in his body was at last understood by his disciples to mean the Temple that was his Body, the Church. The material building that had been the centre of worship was no longer important. Henceforth all worship would take place in any place, but within the Christian community. The community - or the Church - was now the place of sanctification and of prayer to God.

Question:

What was Jesus trying to show by his demonstration in the Temple?

Fourth Sunday of Lent - Year B

First reading:

The Broken Covenant
(2 Chronicles 36.14-16, 19-23)

In the first readings for Sundays in Lent, we have worked through the promising but tragic history of Israel, a history of promises by God, of broken promises and fresh starts by Israel. We have seen this in the stories of the covenant with Noah, Abraham's obedient trust, the commands given to Moses to keep Israel faithful to the Lord. Now we come to the final disaster, inevitably brought on by Israel's repeated failure and infidelity. This whole history of Israel was composed with the background theme that fidelity brought prosperity and that a healing punishment was the inevitable consequence of desertion of the Lord. In this final chapter,

the historian looks back at the ultimate disaster of Exile in Babylon, and the return of a renewed Israel to the Holy City. Even then the promised blessing of God seemed long delayed. They were an oppressed little community, huddled round Jerusalem, harassed by their neighbours and dominated by one foreign power after another. After some years they did summon up energy and resources to rebuild the Temple, but they continued to yearn for the decisive intervention of God that would enable them to serve their Lord in freedom and total dedication.

Question:

Is material prosperity really a blessing?

Second reading:

*The Grace of God
(Ephesians 2.4-10)*

The Letter to the Ephesians is usually considered to be the first commentary and reflection on Paul rather than from the Apostle's own hand, reflecting on the salvation won by Christ. After the record in the first reading of the repeated failures of Israel, the message, twice repeated, that salvation is by grace alone, is particularly apt. Grace here means not a substance poured into our souls to provide some sort of salvific energy, but is the unmerited favour and choice by God. It is a personal relationship rather than a material, rather even than a spiritual gift. God has smiled on each of us and invited us into his friendship. In the light of this gift of friendship, we are strengthened and encouraged to serve him, so that this gift of his friendship becomes an ever stronger and more important element in our lives. God shows us his love and we respond. So he shows us even grater love. But the greatest gift of all is his Son and the salvation, the new life won for us by Christ.

Question:

What are the difficulties in having a personal relationship with God?

Gospel:

*Nicodemus
(John 3.14-21)*

After Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus comes this reflection on his visit. Is it Jesus' reflection or the evangelist's? The text does not make it clear. Throughout the gospel of John, people are coming to Jesus and judging themselves by their reactions to Jesus. The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son. In his turn, the Son does not judge, but we judge ourselves by our reaction to him. So at the wedding at Cana the disciples believe in him and see his glory. In the Temple, the Jews refuse belief and are condemned. Then comes Nicodemus in secret and in fear. He is sitting on the fence, afraid of the Pharisees, but by the time of the burial he has decided for Jesus. After Nicodemus comes the Samaritan woman, cheeky and unbelieving at first, but won over by Jesus' playful persistence. And so on: the Jews on one side, the man healed at the Pool of Bethzatha on the other; the Jews on one side, the man blind from birth on the other. The decision is ours too: when confronted by Jesus do we come to the light that our deeds may be known, or do we shun the light?

Question:

How can we be afraid of the light?

Fifth Sunday of Lent – Year B

First reading:

The New Covenant
(Jeremiah 31.31-34)

For Christians, this reading from Jeremiah can be called the climax of the Old Testament. It is certainly the climax of the history of Israel that we have been following in the first readings of the Sundays of Lent. The exile to Babylon seemed to be the end of the road. Israel had lost king, country, Temple and cult. They had been unfaithful to their Lord once too often, and at last the covenant was left in tatters. Paradoxically, however, this was the moment of advance, the moment that brought Israel to be a world religion, by which all humanity could benefit from the salvation promised to Abraham. The covenant was to be renewed, not, as previously, dependent on the institutions, Law and cult of Israel, but open to every individual, an individual commitment to the Lord, written on human hearts. 'No need for everyone to teach brother'? Yes, we must still learn from one another and accept the guidance of the Church, but the bond is between God and the individual, no longer the race as such. This is 'the covenant in my blood for the forgiveness of sin' to which Jesus refers at the Last Supper. He sees it ratified in his blood, as the first covenant was ratified in the blood of animal sacrifice. The forgiveness it brings is the final forgiveness, pre-echoed in God's forgiveness of the sin of Israel down the ages.

Question:

What important lesson have I recently learned from someone else?

Second reading:

Jesus' Prayer
(Hebrews 5.7-9)

The wonderful second reading is the heart of the Letter to the Hebrews that dwells on the priesthood of Christ. Here the author prepares us for the coming celebration of the Passion by reflecting on the double aspect of the human fear and pain of Jesus, and his complete, loving obedience. It says his prayer was heard. What prayer? Not the prayer to be spared death, for that prayer was not heard. Rather the deeper prayer, the prayer at the heart of his burning desire to establish the kingship of God in human hearts, bringing peace between heaven and earth by his perfect obedience. How then did he 'learn obedience through suffering'? The secret of the Cross of Jesus is that here he reached the perfect obedience to his Father, giving everything to his Father's will. His whole life and ministry had been devoted to the Father's will, to establishing the Father's Kingship on earth. Now it reaches its highest point. His perfect obedience overrode and expunged the disobedience of Adam, that is, the archetypal disobedience of the whole human race. So by accepting defeat, pain and humiliation he obtained for himself and for all victory, bliss and exaltation to glory.

Question:

What have I learnt from suffering, my own or someone else's?

Gospel:

Exaltation through Suffering

(John 12.20-33)

This moving gospel reading is the immediate prelude to the account of the Last Supper and the Passion. It is full of Jesus' dread and confidence at what he knows is approaching. In the gospel of John, there is no agony in the garden before Jesus' arrest, for in John the story of the Passion is so shaped that it is clearly the triumph of the Son of man. There is no mention of humiliation or mockery. Jesus remains in control from the beginning, when he permits the guards to take him into custody, until the end, when he calls out that he is ready to die: 'It is complete.' This is all the hour of the exaltation of the Son of man, when Jesus is raised up in every sense. All the more important, then, for John to show before the Passion that the cost for Jesus was real, with this little dialogue in prayer between Jesus and his Father. This is John's equivalent of the prayer in the garden. The second reading from Hebrews shows that there were in early Christianity strong but slightly variant traditions of Jesus' prayer before his Passion. All express his very human fear, his unshakable commitment to his task and his loving confidence in his Father's care.

Question:

What are my real fears? Can I entrust them to God?