

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year C

Fourth Sunday of Lent

First reading: (Joshua 5.9-12)
Passover in the Plains of Jericho

We are working through the history of Israel towards the promise of the New Covenant which is the central point of Easter. In this year's readings, the whole period between the Exodus from Egypt and the promise of the New Covenant at the time of the Babylonian exile, some 600 years later, is represented by this moment of arrival in the Promised Land of Canaan. This is the moment when the provisional arrangements of the desert wanderings come to an end.

The idea of manna is based on an edible honey-like excretion of a desert plant. The stories of the desert wanderings are folk history, not modern research history. It is best to think of manna as the symbol of God's wonderful protection and feeding of Israel in the harsh and almost uninhabitable conditions of the Sinai desert. The reading describes a double celebration, bringing together two festivals. The Passover in origin is a feast of wandering nomads, as they move at the first full moon of spring from their sheltered winter pastures to cooler summer pastures. The Festival of Unleavened Bread, by way of contrast, marks the beginning of the wheat harvest, a feast of a settled agricultural people. For Paul, it represents the newness of Easter, the freshness of the New Covenant.

Question:

Would it help you and your family to make more of religious festivals? How could you do so?

Second reading: (2 Corinthians 5.17-21)
Reconciled in Christ

As we approach the commemoration of Christ's Passion and Resurrection we begin to focus more carefully on these events. The New Testament uses a variety of images for the event: Christ was glorified (using the idea of the awesome divine glory), raised to the right hand of God (using the imagery of Psalm 110), exalted to heaven.

We were redeemed like freed slaves, ransomed like hostages, reconciled like estranged friends. When Paul uses this image, there is no question of appeasing an angry God, who is to be reconciled by exacting from his innocent Son the punishment due to us sinners. No, man does not reconcile God, but God always does the reconciling. It is a divine action that takes place in Christ.

How could God make the sinless one into sin? In Hebrew, the same word is used both for 'sin' and for 'sin offering'. Either Paul is using language of the Hebrew cult to express Christ as a sin offering or he means that Christ was put in the position of sinners. Paul likes playing with words. In either case, the heart of the action on Calvary is the full expression of the unitive, divine love of Jesus and his Father.

Question:

Do you see God as angry and vengeful? Is there any truth in this idea?

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Gospel:

(Luke 15.1-3, 11-32)

The Prodigal Son

Who is the hero of the story? What should its title be? Some call it the parable of the Powerless Father, for the father is powerless to do anything but welcome his son.

Clearly, the principal message of the parable is that we can count on God's forgiveness, whatever we do. The contrast is also between the two sons. The younger insults his father: all he thinks about is his inheritance, as if he wished his father already dead. All the same, the father is eagerly on the watch, and forgets all his dignity to run and welcome his returning son. And to persuade the elder son to join in the party, he even leaves his dinner guests at table, going out into the field to urge the jealous elder brother to join in. Forgiveness and love is his whole motivation.

The elder son responds to his father with insults, 'that son of yours', inventing guesses about sexual loose living, of which there is no suggestion in the story of the younger son. It is a splendid example of Luke's delicate, witty and subtle characterization. The anti-hero's little speech to himself as he wonders how to solve his problem is also typical of Luke, and occurs in several of his parables.

Question:

Which brother comes out of the story best? Have you ever felt like the elder brother? Would the story lose or gain anything if the parent were a mother?
