

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year A

Third Sunday of Lent

First reading:

(Exodus 17.3-7)

Water from the Rock

In each Lent, the first readings dwell on the Old Testament progress of the history of salvation; the third Sunday is always about Moses. In this year, Year A, the incident is chosen to pair with the gospel reading about living water.

Christ is the living water of salvation, an image of which is the water provided for God's people when they were tortured by thirst in the desert. It was not just that they could do with a bit of a drink, as we in a well-watered country experience. When you run out of water in the desert you lose all strength, all will to advance, and eventually wilt to death.

On two separate occasions, the story is told of Moses striking the rock, and the rabbis held that the rock followed them through the desert. Paul interprets the rock as Christ, who always provides for his people, but with most of them God was not well pleased. They continued to rebel and complain about their hardships and to long for 'the leeks and onions' of their slave life in Egypt.

With the same ingratitude, we continue to neglect the salvation offered us, absorbed in any passing pleasures we can find.

Question:

How do you use water? Is water of life a good image for the gifts of God?

Second reading:

(Romans 5.1-2, 5-8)

Peace with God through Jesus

Gradually explaining the mystery of salvation in his great Letter to the Romans, Paul has outlined a world sunk in evil. Then he meditates on Abraham's trust in God's promises, the same unwavering trust that is our only way to salvation, an unshaken conviction that God will come to our rescue in our shame and our failures.

But what is the means by which God fulfils his promise of obliterating the evil that grips the human race? It can only be the obedience of Jesus, shown in his loving and obedient death on the Cross, which outdoes the disobedience of the whole human race, represented in Adam's sin.

It is not the gore and suffering that are in themselves salvific - like a price paid for human delinquency - but the total extent of the love shown in unflinching obedience to the Father's will. It was love for the Father, but also love for us, for whom he was to establish the Kingship of God on earth. Paul seems to argue that, although in normal terms we were not worth dying for, Christ did die for us, just as in his ministry he did not wait for sinners to repent, but actively and unconditionally called them back to himself.

Question:

What evils grip the human race today, and what can Jesus' work do to solve them?

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Gospel:

(John 4.5-42)

The Samaritan at the Well

In this lively dialogue, Jesus almost seems to be teasing the Samaritan woman, deliberately leading her into misunderstanding about what he means by living water or about the conditions of worship.

Nothing daunted, she gives as good as she gets, replying with a cheeky series of sarcastic questions, gradually edging nearer to the truth: an open-minded Jew - greater than our father Jacob - a prophet - and finally acknowledging him as the Messiah.

With its serious message it is a lovely example of Jesus' willingness to engage with people as they are, and of his openness with women. On these last three Sundays of Lent before Palm Sunday in Year A, the Church lays before us the three great symbols of the baptisms that will be celebrated at Easter. This concerns not only those who will be baptized at the Easter Vigil, but all those who are invited to renew our baptismal promise and commitment at Easter.

Then we enter afresh into the living and nourishing water of God's love that surpasses any food or drink, into the light that enlightens the blind (the Cure of the Man Born Blind) and true life (the Raising of Lazarus).

Question:

In prayer, should we treat Jesus as the Samaritan Woman does?
