

THE LENTEN WORD

The Second Week

Monday

Seeking Forgiveness

Dan 9:4-10; Lk 6:36-38

We're sometimes forced to say the words, "I have done wrong." But we hope not to have to say them often. The Church, by contrast, says them so often that they echo in her mind; although we don't rejoice in our failures, we never forget that we're far short of what we should be. This isn't altogether the sad thing it might seem. It is, rather, a consequence of our belief that *God is going to make us just*. Those who believe they can be healed hide nothing from themselves or their doctor. We must hide nothing from ourselves or our Redeemer.

The Gospel, as always, takes us further. If we are seeking the healing of God for ourselves, we must lend what strength we have to help others who are suffering. This hospital of the world is a co-operative effort, where those on the way to health must support each other in all things. We've all known people who, in times of common disaster, become demanding and selfish, making it worse for those who are trying to save the situation. In the spiritual struggle, this becomes a moment of judgment: *the amount you measure out is the amount you will be given back*.

Tuesday

When are we going to start?

Is 1:10,16-20; Mt 23:1-12

We like to contemplate goodness; everyone likes to dream. Even poor people who give money to the Lottery sometimes think of themselves solving the problems of their families and friends with vast gifts of money. But a dream-world full of "if only..." is unworthy of the God who works through the Cross. It's two weeks tomorrow since Lent began. Has the new heart begun to beat in me? Isaiah reminds me that it isn't about the viability of a pipe-dream that we are thinking. We stand on a brink: "*If you obey, you shall eat good things; if you persist in rebellion, the sword shall devour you instead.*" And there is a special message today for those who know it all - people like the clergy, and seasoned believers. Believing in the Gospel isn't a dream either. If its presence in my life is relegated to sentimental decoration, there is a good word for me. Jesus in Matthew calls me *a hypocrite* - two-faced. The expected arrival of the Gospel is overdue, and we must no longer deny its urgency. You have a Master, and you are all brothers: you have one Father, in heaven; you have only one teacher between you. Be humble, get off your dignity, and put your shoulder to the wheel - forgiving, fasting, praying - and there may still be time for you to be with Jesus when he saves the world.

Wednesday

A Place at the Side of Christ

Jer 18:18-20; Mt 20:17-28

Jeremiah had to suffer for his message. He had to believe, as they threw him down the well, as they contradicted, denounced, ostracized and imprisoned him, that he was truly doing the will of a God - a God who seemed, incidentally, far from solicitous about the fate of his prophet. And what of this loving mother in the Gospel? She saw Jesus lift her lads away from their father and his boats, leaving him with only the hired help; she knows what Jesus is like. With what thoughts does she ask him to save them a place to right and to left of him when he makes good?

Jesus is right to wonder if they know what she asks. He has already announced the Passion: perhaps none of them really believe him. *Perhaps he's speaking figuratively, or perhaps it won't be so bad*. But it will! We must be certain that no such false optimism infects us, as we turn our faces resolutely towards Jerusalem.

Thursday

Opening the Flesh

Jer 17:5-10; Lk 16:19-31

Flesh, said Tertullian, *is the hinge of salvation*. If it *opens*, we can go in. If it *stays shut*, we stay outside. Lent is thus the time for turning the key in our nature, so that it becomes open, and not closed. For this to work, the hinge of our nature - the flesh - must be ready to turn, to let us pass. Flesh is a place where selfishness can lodge with great ease. Its voice whispers to us constantly of what we deserve by way of comfort, pleasure, satisfaction - all without the slightest reason, beyond the carnal knowledge which is so powerful: *You know you'd like that...and why on earth not...be honest...* From the flesh come all sorts of longing, and power for the decisions which flow from our longings. It is no keeper of moral principles, and it can turn all its power towards evil with perfect and consummate ease. What on paper, or in the life of

others, or even before the tribunal of my own judgment, would disgust me, or at least distress me, the flesh can advocate, legitimise, and convince me to do. Only when it opens to the Word does the flesh live with a truly human life. And what is it like, this flesh, when it is at one with the Word of God? At one end of the scale, it is *crucified* (“Not my will, but your will be done!”). At the other end of the scale, *transfigured* - revealed as exalted, risen from the dead, and (for the first time) truly human. Dives in his mansion fell disastrously short of humanity because of the wall and its locked gates and Lazarus outside. Lazarus, for all his sores, was still capable of transfiguration, because *he put no trust in things of flesh*; not because he was above such things, but because he didn’t have any things of flesh in which to trust. He thus embodies the Lucan beatitude: “Blessed are you who are poor now! You shall be rich!” I think we have to go in Lenten search of our poverty. We may need it later.

Friday

Thrown Out

Gen 37:3-28; Mt 21:33-46

Joseph sold as a slave, and Jesus killed “for his inheritance”. I suppose that was true in a sense, in that his people valued their own grasp on their religion (“the vineyard”) too strongly to accept the message of Jesus, and to recognise him as the heir. What we are left with is two different views of what is happening: the priests and scribes think they are preserving the holiness of the people from Jesus’ blasphemous claims; we think of the people missing their opportunity to receive Jesus as their Messiah. We should not forget, in our own acceptance of Jesus as Lord of all lives, the depth of his disgrace and condemnation as it begins to overshadow him. The fact is: *we are followers of a convict who was condemned to death and executed*. We must not too easily enshrine him, or lose the sense that he was dragged to his death through every known sort of human desolation. The anguish of conflict and refusal, the multiplication of lies and false witness, the withdrawal of friends, the denunciation from those in authority, the grisly arranged trial in the darkness, the involvement of the Roman killing-machine, and the appalling conclusion are so easily reduced to an annual drama in Holy Week, and a liturgical formula for the rest of the time. Today’s Scripture reminds us that *Jesus is rejected by the builders of this world*, and that he is the cornerstone of the true world to which we must belong. We cannot do that without sharing his outlaw status. We are wild cards.

Saturday

Going Home

Micah 7:14-20; Lk 15:1-32

Perhaps the most famous of Jesus’ stories, certainly the least heeded, if our attitude to sin is anything to go by. What are we to make of the prophet Micah’s image of God “treading down our faults, throwing our sins to the bottom of the sea”? Certainly it is a long way from “judgment” in the way we’ve learned to think of it. We think of judgment as a court, with us in the dock. Here, by contrast, is the Judge apparently working prodigiously *to darkhole the evidence!* It is a superb foundation for the story of the father and his two sons. Love is the name for what motivates his relationship with them both, and both the good boy and the wastrel misunderstand in their different ways. I think the Lenten liturgy sometimes frightens us with the unpredictable judgment of God. Today it silences us with his unsearchable depth of love and forgiveness. How far have we searched into this part of the revelation? How far have we truly appropriated the degree to which God simply discounts our offences? To be an *innocent* is a wonderful thing, though few of us can be so. To be *forgiven* is to be prized in the eyes of God, and that is more wonderful. But to be a *sinner unforgiven* is surely most miserable. That lonely, rage-filled, sulking figure that will not come in to the family feast is a haunting one. Maybe it is me. Certainly it partly is all of us. Lent gives us permission to return home, and to meet one another with love; this story cries out for us to abandon our self-righteousness, and come.