

THE LENTEN WORD

The Third Week

Monday

No Prophet is Accepted at Home

2K 5:1-15; Lk 4:24-30

The happening in the Gospel looks like a dress-rehearsal for the Crucifixion. It is certainly an horrific omen for the future. A lynch-mob hustling Jesus up the hill in his own home town...we shall see these features again at the end of the story. Jesus has claimed to be a prophet, and has pointed out that the response he is sensing in his hearers is like that which the classical prophets knew - blank rejection. Luke, the Gentile evangelist, rejoices in the way in which the apostles, refused by the Jews, call the Gentiles to faith; for him, this picture of Jesus himself meeting rejection from his own is deeply moving. Perhaps we could ask ourselves whether we have allowed Jesus' words to enter our own hearts with power to change them. We are so used to calling ourselves Christian; are we assuming too much? If we lose the sense that Jesus asks us for total obedience, with no conditions, we must have the same sense of challenge before him which shocked the Jews. Do we feel that our previous lifestyle is up for review - with huge potential consequences? If not, we have a chilling image of refusal in today's Gospel.

Tuesday

Forgiveness and Conversion

Dan 3:25,34-43; Mt 18:21-35

In the first reading we find a humble voice, praying to God from the heart of the fire for his power to return to the broken people in their sadness. Then Jesus gives us, in the Gospel, an image of recalcitrant malice in the forgiven servant who has not learned to forgive.

The first voice is certainly a holy one, for all its awareness of sin. In fact, the sense of sin here is as much a *communal* one as a personal one; and it is balanced by an overwhelming confidence in the enduring love of God for his people through the ages, into which Azariah makes his appeal. The pardoned debtor of the Gospel is in sharp contrast. The outrageous generosity of his master has quite failed to change his heart, and he goes forth into battle over a trifling sum as if nothing had happened. Notice how the other servants respond *communally* to what has happened. They all know of the Master's kindness, and they know that the cruel servant has failed to respond properly to it. They come to the Master to ask him to complete his generosity with an act of justice. He does not delay, but at once plunges the ungrateful creditor into the full obligation of his own original debts. God has no difficulty in loving and forgiving us. But we must not give our lives to the pursuit of judgment on others, when our own survival depends, not on rewarded justice, but on the merciful forgiveness of debts we could not possibly pay.

Wednesday

Keep the Law of God

Dt 4:1-9; Mt 5:17-19

Deuteronomy means "the second law"; not a replacement for the Law of Sinai, but a renewed promulgation of it, a new giving-out. Although it describes Moses as speaking, it was not written by him; Moses led the people out of Egypt about 1300 BC, and Deuteronomy was written out of the experience of Exile in Babylon, perhaps in the sixth century BC. It tries to renew people's awareness of the Law given in the desert, assuring them that the commandments are more than ever valid, and that the people's return to their own country and their assurance of life in the promised land still depends on their keeping the will of God. "Remember the things your eyes have seen, and do not let them slip from your heart all the days of your life!" For Moses, that meant the Exodus;

for Deuteronomy, it meant even more the survival of the Exile; for us, it includes above all else the life of Jesus of Nazareth. *But the principle is the same*: we must keep the works of God before us every day; and the Law of God for us is in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. In our listening to him, in our obedient living of his Gospel, and in the receiving of him in the Eucharist we keep God's gift to us, we centre our lives on it, we call on the Creator to make us holy. In this spirit we keep the whole of revelation, knowing that we live *by every word that comes from the mouth of God*.

Thursday

Integrity (1)

Jer 7:23-28; Lk 11:14-23

Integrity is getting your whole self together, and it bears fruit in a peacefulness with all that we are. Few of us would claim that we have done this, and as long as that's the case there is hope for us, and there is work for us to do. We shan't have integrity until we have done justice to all other people; if we are holding back someone else's due, or refusing forgiveness to our enemies, or exploiting someone else for our own ends, then our house is built on sand, and we are insecure and deserve to lack peace. If we are refusing the truth in ourselves, or denying something important about our lives, we can similarly expect no peace; we are formally denying our own integrity. Our friend in this is not God, but the Father of Lies.

The one relationship that is vital to us is the one with the Creator. He has the reasons for me, and the reasons for all other people, in his divine heart. He is offering to share them with us by loving us and calling us to love others as he loves them. His will is the uniting and integrating purpose of us all. *Lord, share with us your wisdom, and unite us, and make us whole.*

Friday

Integrity (2)

Hos 14:2-10; Mk 12:28-34

The Gospel gives us the Creed of Israel as the first and greatest commandment. In the oneness of God lies hidden the oneness of the Creation, which is our own integrity. All our heart, all our soul, all our mind, all our strength can be united only in him. Hosea gives us the lovely imagery of the tended garden to encourage us to seek that flourishing peace which is God's gift. Cleansed of idolatries and loyalties to what is false, the people of God can live "built on love and founded in love": for the Lord says: "All your fruitfulness comes from me."

Saturday

Integrity (3)

Hos 5:15-6:6; Lk 18:9-14

Nothing but love is enough for us to give God. Formal obedience, which was the way of the Pharisee, cannot replace it (although it might sometimes play a rôle). So the parable today tells us how a man who does not shine in obedience can yet love God and be pleasing to him; and how a perfectionist in behaviour who lives by self-satisfaction fails to please God. Our own formal religion is a way of obedience; it will only lead us to God if it is done with real love. We should seek in Lent to purify ourselves of empty, vain churchiness, and descend to that place in us that weeps over our helplessness, fails in hope, and turns very simply to God for his gift of life. We can be sure that this humility will not fail to bring him into our life; but this will in turn give life to our faith and our prayer, and all that we are pledged to do for one another: *What I want is love, not sacrifice: knowledge of God, not burnt-offerings.*