

THE LENTEN WORD

the fifth week

Monday

Women in trouble

Dan 13:1-62; John 8:1-11

Here are two women: Susanna, the worthy wife of a good husband, embodies the beauty and poetry of the figure called *the daughter of Zion*. The woman in the Gospel has been arrested for adultery, a capital crime, and there is no doubt that she is guilty as charged. The meeting of these two women in today's liturgy is almost the whole point. Susanna comes to be vindicated through the prophetic voice of Daniel, a mere child in the crowd. The woman in the Gospel finds her advocate in Jesus, the incarnate Word. In Daniel and in Jesus God is present to save: his intervention might be seen as *justice* in Daniel, and as *mercy* in Jesus - from a human point of view. From God's point of view the two qualities are doubtless the same, and we should try to rise above our narrow idea of justice and our unsighted grasp of mercy to see that in God, who "knows of what we are made", there is only one attitude towards us and our lives, which is unquestionable and eternal love. Only when the love of God enters our tangled lives does it take on different forms. We should enter today into the worthy silence which Jesus creates around the woman, and into which he speaks: "Has no-one condemned you?...Neither do I."

Tuesday

Lifting up the Son of Man

Num 21:4-9; John 8:21-30

Few incidents in the Old Testament are so mysterious as this. "sympathetic medicine" is an ancient, perhaps instinctive method of healing, borne out by things like inoculation and homeopathy. Moses is instructed to display the source of the disease, and "all who look on it will live". If a Christian hand had reached back to insert these words, to prepare for the mystery of the Cross, it could hardly have improved on them. The Cross is the sign of condemnation, suffering and dishonourable death - all the things we fear can be incorporated in that one terrible sign. Yet it is the sign of the healing of God for the world; and that *transfigures* the experience of condemnation, suffering, dishonour, and death for us. There are times when the Cross seems to dominate our lives with fearful and dramatic power, other times when it weighs on our shoulders with familiar and grinding routine pain. Today we are given an image of it as mirroring perfectly our disease - diagnosing with exactitude our need - and promising us a sovereign healing "when we have lifted up the Son of Man".

Wednesday

You will be made free

Dan 3:14-28; John 8:31-42

The three youths thrown to the furnace for refusing to worship Nebuchadnezzar's idol find themselves "walking about freely in the heart of the fire". The Hebrews in the desert found their freedom, too; but sometimes the desert was too hot for them, and freedom sometimes feels like a burden. In the Gospel today we see the Jews facing Jesus, who uncompromisingly challenges them to be what they claim to be: if they are sons of the Exodus, they should not accept their slavery to sin; if they are sons of Abraham, they should be as ready to believe as he was; if they are children of God, they should welcome Jesus as their elder brother. And we too can be arraigned by Jesus today for our lack of integrity, our willingness to do and think and say what will not match our vocation. If we can't feel the fire around us in this hardened world, it may be because we have evaded that tough freedom from its hold which the Cross means. We are given an image today of the ability to walk freely in the world, unharmed by its power to burn and destroy. In this hopeful image we should find courage to live for God.

Thursday

I Am

Gen 17:3-9; John 8:51-59

In today's Gospel Jesus claims to be the fulfilment of Abraham's hope for a son. "Your father Abraham rejoiced to think that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." The birth of Isaac gave Abraham joy: but this was only the foretaste of his joy that he would be the ancestor of the Messiah. If those who heard this claim found it an effrontery, they were hardly prepared for the

sequel: "Before Abraham ever was, *I Am*". Here Jesus takes on his own lips the name of God, as if he were speaking to Moses from the heart of the burning bush.

Jesus was eventually condemned by his own people *for blasphemy*; John tells us that this was not a sudden outburst on his part, in a law court at the very end; all through his life he is clearly claiming divine life and prerogatives. In this Gospel he makes our verdict on him the greatest question we will ever have to answer. In Lent we are asked for a sincere and heartfelt response in faith, hope and love, so that our Easter profession of faith can be truly renewed.

Friday

Stoning the Prophets

Jer 20:10-13; John 10:31-42

Blasphemy is not an offence that would ring any Roman bells, but for the Jews it was a capital crime, evoking the reactions of a lynch-mob. Jeremiah knew all about ill-treatment because of his message, and put his trust in God for deliverance. So Jesus does not have to seek very far for the warranty of his situation; "*Jerusalem! Jerusalem! You who kill the prophets, and stone those who are sent to you!*" he says; and how soon he must have recognised his own violent destiny, when he began to call for their trust in him as Son of God!

Behind their inability to believe in him there is an inability to believe in themselves. When we insist on sending God back to his heaven, when we put first our need to preserve him from our contamination, we are despairing of our own salvation, we are forgetting that, with all our faults, we are still his creation that he loves. In their anxiety for Jesus to be proved a mere man - and they go a long way towards doing that on Calvary - his fellow-Jews are testing to destruction his claim to be something *more* than man. To experience our life as sacred, as open to the divine life, costs a great personal act of faith. We must try to encourage one another to make it; and the sincerest way is for the love of God to become flesh in us: to love one another, to forgive, and to accept. "Our love...must be something real, and active."

Saturday

Caiaphas' Prophecy

Ezek 37:21-28; John 11:45-56

Ezekiel talks of God coming to make his people whole. He will bring them home from their exile. He will resolve their messy politics, and their king will be their shepherd. He will cleanse them of idols and of crimes; David will return to be at their head, and the Lord himself will make his home among them in his sanctuary. All of these is summed up in his phrase: "*I will sanctify them.*" This may strike us as an odd reading to accompany the Gospel. Here is Caiaphas, the High Priest, concocting the plot that will remove Jesus from their political agenda and leave them quietly compromised as before. But remember that this plot is *a necessary part* of the plan of God, who brings good out of evil and life out of the grave. It is *necessary* for death to be administered to Jesus with all human solemnity; and out of the death which has been waiting for him - even at the heart of our human religion - God will make a life that is open *to all who will accept him*. We always have a tendency to interpret the Passion as a disastrous mistake, as if the chief function of it is to show how very good God is at *contradicting* our worst mistakes, or *rescuing* us from our bad ideas. But the Resurrection is not a snopake applied to an unfortunate death. It is the result of an exaltation that *demand*s the Cross as its first stage. So Caiaphas cannot help speaking as a prophet when he says: "*It is necessary for this man to die so that the whole people can be saved.*" Tomorrow Passiontide begins. How has Lent been for you? What do you think: will He come to the festival - or not?