

Sunday, March 24, 2019

Third Sunday of Lent

Meditation and Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

Mass Readings:

1st Reading Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15

2nd Reading: 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12

Responsorial: Psalm 103:1-4, 6-8, 11

Gospel: Luke 13:1-9

Our God is “Gracious and Merciful, Slow to Anger and Abounding in Love and Fidelity” (Exodus 34:6)

I have witnessed the affliction of my people. (Exodus 3:7)

On Ash Wednesday, we began Lent with the age-old call to repentance: “Return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning” (Joel 2:12). That theme continues in today’s second reading and Gospel. But the first reading is something different. It’s not about our need to repent; it’s about God’s free, overflowing mercy.

For the children of Abraham, God’s mercy came in the form of release from slavery in Egypt. For us, that mercy comes in the form of release from slavery to sin.

God showed mercy and grace to the Israelites, not because they were perfect, but because they were his people and he cared for them. Likewise, he shows mercy to us because we are his children, and he doesn’t want to see us bound in sin.

Exodus was just the beginning too. From age to age, God has shown himself to be merciful toward his people. He told Moses that this is how he should always be remembered: “The Lord, the Lord, a God gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in love and fidelity” (Exodus 34:6). Other prophets then continued the teaching, always referring to God as “gracious and merciful” (Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). Even the psalms praise God’s mercy repeatedly.

When Jesus came, he focused his ministry on the mercy and graciousness of his heavenly Father as well (Matthew 5:7; Luke 6:36; 10:37). But even more important, he showed himself to be the very mercy of God. He refused to condemn a woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). He welcomed tax collectors and sinners as disciples (Luke 15:1-2). And best of all, he promised the thief on the cross, “Today you will be with me in Paradise” (23:43).

It’s no wonder that one of the most common sentences Jesus heard while he was on earth was “Have mercy on me!” It’s a prayer he cannot help but answer!

“Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy.”

(Many thanks to *The Word Among Us* (www.wau.org) for allowing us to use meditations from their monthly devotional magazine. Used with permission.)

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Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion:

1. In the first reading, God comes down to Moses and speaks these words from the burning bush: *I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore, I have come down to rescue them.* The reading continues with these words: *Moses said to God, "But when I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' if they ask me, 'What is his name?' what am I to tell them?" God replied, "I am who am." Then he added, "This is what you shall tell the Israelites: I AM sent me to you."*
 - How do God's words show that he is a faithful God who comes down himself to his people to "rescue them"?
 - In what ways has God, through Jesus Christ, "come down" and rescued you from the power of sin and death and the power of the world, the flesh, and the devil? What areas of your life still need God's intervention?
 - In the ending words, God responds to Moses request to tell him his name: *This is what you shall tell the Israelites: I AM sent me to you.* What does this name tell you about who God is, and his nature?
2. The Responsorial Psalm begins with these words of praise: *Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all my being, bless his holy name. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.* The psalmist then describes these many benefits: *"He pardons all your iniquities, heals all your ills, He redeems your life from destruction, crowns you with kindness and compassion. The LORD secures justice and the rights of all the oppressed. It ends with these powerful words: Merciful and gracious is the LORD, slow to anger and abounding in kindness. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so surpassing is his kindness toward those who fear him.*
 - In the beginning words of the psalm, how would you summarize the reasons the psalmist gives for these words: *Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits?* What are some reasons for you to *Bless the LORD?*
 - In light of what Christ has done for you, what are some ways you can be an imitator of Christ and be *Merciful and gracious and slow to anger and abounding in kindness* to others--especially to those who may have wronged you?
3. In the second reading, St. Paul reminds the Corinthians of what happened to the Israelites in the desert: *I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea, and all of them were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. All ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they drank from a spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was the Christ. Yet God was not pleased with most of them, for they were struck down in the desert. He goes on to say that *These things happened as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil things, as they did. Do not grumble as some of them did, and suffered death by the destroyer.*
 - What message do you think St. Paul was trying to convey to the Israelites with his words? In what ways are they a reminder to us not to "desire evil things" or "grumble" -- which can often be a cause of disunity and harm to others?
 - What steps can you take during Lent to be an encourager and faith builder to your family and others?*
4. In the Gospel, Jesus warns the people of assuming that the sufferings or misfortunes of others were caused by their sins. These examples are given: *Some people told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with the blood of their sacrifices. Jesus said to them in reply, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were greater sinners than all other Galileans? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did! Or those eighteen people who were killed when the tower at Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than everyone else who lived in Jerusalem? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!*
 - What message do you think Jesus was trying to convey to the people by the examples he gives?
 - Why do you think he also tells the people (and us) that *if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did?*
 - How can you reach out more to others who are suffering no matter what the cause?
5. The meditation is a reflection on the first reading, and its opening words reminds us that this reading is "not about our need to repent; it's about God's free, overflowing mercy." It goes on to tell us that "For the children of Abraham, God's mercy came in the form of release from slavery in Egypt. For us, that mercy comes in the form of release from slavery to sin." The meditation ends with these words: "It's no wonder that one of the most common sentences Jesus heard while he was on earth was 'Have mercy on me!' It's a prayer he cannot help but answer!"
 - In what way is the first reading "not about our need to repent; it's about God's free, overflowing mercy"?
 - Why do you think that "one of the most common sentences Jesus heard while he was on earth was 'Have mercy on me'"? Why is it "a prayer he cannot help but answer," especially through the sacrament of Reconciliation?

Take some time now to pray and thank the Lord that he is *merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in kindness* (Psalm 103:8). Use the prayer below from the end of the meditation as a starting point.

"Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy."

[The discussion questions were created by Maurice Blumberg, who is currently a member of the board of directors of the ChristLife Catholic Ministry for Evangelization (www.christlife.org), a member of the National Service Committee Council of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (www.nsc-chariscenter.org), and a board member of The Love of Christ Foundation. Prior to this, Maurice was the founding executive director of the National Fellowship of Catholic Men, a chairman of the board of *The Word Among Us* (www.wau.org), and a director of partner relations for The Word Among Us Partners ministry. He can be contacted at mblumberg@wau.org or mblumberg@aol.com.]