

Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings

Fifth Week of Lent 2020



We continue fervent prayers for our brothers and sisters around the world who are suffering great losses due to the pandemic. Let us all do our part to mitigate the spread of the virus, spending these last weeks of Lent, fasting from our normal daily lives and praying for and giving alms to those in need.

Sunday, March 29: *"I will put my spirit in you that you may live..." (Ez 37:12-14) "But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the spirit is alive because of righteousness." (Rom 8:8-11) "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live; everyone who believes in me will never die." (Jn 11:1-45)*

I'm not sure we could have picked better scripture passages than those we read today. Ezekiel has just witnessed a vision of the dry bones of Israel coming back to life after *"all hope is lost."* Paul reminds us our true life is not in the suffering and sin of the flesh, but in the Spirit. And Jesus comforts his friend Martha in her grief with some of the most dramatic words in Scripture. Then, in a tender, compassionate voice, he asks her, *"Do you believe this?"*

Jesus asks this of each of us in that same tender way. When things are going well, we might dismiss the question with an academic answer: "Of course I believe in you!" But when times are hard, when sorrow and suffering threaten to overwhelm us – this is when we need to answer Jesus's question from deep within our fearful, wounded hearts.

Today's Provision: Let Jesus to help you shoulder your grief. We hear *"Jesus wept."* The Greek translation: Jesus groaned in his Spirit; he "snorted" in his grief. The image is one of him sobbing, yielding himself to the turmoil he felt. Yes there were, are, and will be those in the crowd that question why he let Lazarus die, why he let so many suffer from the virus now plaguing us, why thousands are out of work. Jesus never promised an end to human sorrow and pain. He promised to be with us until the end of time, in our grief and in our joy. Allow the arms of the suffering Christ to embrace and support you during this difficult time. And let's be tender and compassionate with each other as well.

Monday, March 30: *Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger...he straightened up and said to them, "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he bent down and wrote on the ground. (Jn 8:1-11)*

This Gospel reading is my very favorite. It illustrates so succinctly Jesus's power over the status quo. He fulfills the roles of priest, prophet, and king by healing the woman of her sin, challenging the elders, and showing the assembled crowd the law based not on punishment but on mercy.

But what fascinates me the most is the image of him writing on the ground. Others have found it fascinating too. It is the subject of more than 30 pieces of artwork, some of which I had the pleasure of seeing several years ago at the Louvre in Paris. Some artists have depicted his dramatic words in Latin. Some of us may have learned he was writing down the sins of the elders who brought the woman forward. But if I were to ever create a piece of art (which would end up, not in a museum, but maybe on a refrigerator door somewhere), here's what I would portray:
I, II, III, IV, V, VI, VII, VIII, IX, X !

I think Jesus uses the time before to compose himself, calm the crowd, and ask the Spirit for guidance. He silences the elders, and his quiet and detached demeanor afterwards allowed people to grasp the power of his words and leave the scene, chastised but changed.

Today's provision: Don't react. Respond. A time-honored technique to diffuse a tense situation is to count to ten before responding. What if we used those ten seconds to ask the Holy Spirit to guide our lips and open our ears and hearts? The next time you find yourself in a heated discussion, stop and imagine Jesus writing on the ground. Count to ten and trace a cross or a peace sign on the ground of your mind. Ask for guidance. This takes practice and patience, but O Lord, we need it now! Give it a try.

Tuesday, March 31: *"O LORD, hear my prayer, and let my cry come to you. Hide not your face from me in the day of my distress. Incline your ear to me; in the day when I call, answer me speedily." (Ps 102)*

Today's Provision: Pray Psalm 102. Like many of the psalms, this is one for a time of distress. If it can aid your prayer during these difficult days, by all means, pray with it. If you are looking for psalms of comfort and hope, consider Psalms 46, 62, 91, or 121. Or, if you seem to have lots of time on your hands, ☺ go big! Read the entire Psalter.

Wednesday, April 1: *King Nebuchadnezzar's face became livid with utter rage....He ordered the furnace heated seven times more and had the strongest men in his army cast them into the white-hot furnace. (Dn 3:14-20, 91-92, 95)*

This is NOT a story about Nebuchadnezzar's devotion to his god or country. This is about a king and his devotion to his own power. This excerpt skips the part about the strong men of his army being "devoured" by the flames from the furnace. That's okay. It's what's known in the power business as "collateral damage" or, more colloquially, "being thrown under the bus." And it's so much easier, isn't it, that these individuals have no names, that they are just a footnote we can set aside. *"Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely."* (Lord Acton)

Today's Provision: Call out Abuses of Power. Power is seductive, even more so than riches. It distorts one's thinking and eliminates God from the picture. For some, having their authority questioned throws them into a rage. Want to know what that looks like? Turn on the TV. Abuse of power happens everywhere, from the highest echelons of government, business, sports, and entertainment to the confines of the abusive household around the corner. Jesus called out abuse of power every time he saw it. Make no mistake: If we call ourselves Christians, we must do the same.

Thursday, April 2: *"I will render you exceedingly fertile; I will make nations of you; kings shall stem from you....On your part, you and your descendants after you must keep my covenant throughout the ages."* (Gn 17:3-9)

Paul reflects on this exchange between God and Abraham in Romans 4: *"He believed, hoping against hope...he did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body as already dead and the dead womb of his wife...he did not doubt God's promise."* Does the phrase *"hoping against hope"* refer only to the revival of Abraham's body and that of his wife, or is there a deeper message? God's promise to Abraham rested not only on what God had promised him, but on the faith of the generations to come. In hindsight, perhaps that's what required the greater hope!

As Christians, we live in hope. The phrase "hopeless Christian" is a contradiction in terms. But our hope needs to extend beyond God's promises, beyond Christ's salvific sacrifice, beyond our own desire for eternal life. Our hope needs to rest in the future, on the generations to come. Just as God worked with the rebellious Israelites throughout the ages, God will work with us as well. Don't despair. God's promise to Abraham depends on our hope that we too can and will move from our self-centered ways to make real the peace God offers.

Today's Provision: Hope. Hope is essential at all times, but even more now as we face this global threat. If the constant newsfeed is tearing you up, STOP. Find one reasonable source for information and rely on that. Listen to neither the naysayers nor the doomsday-ers. Focus in on the wonderful stories of neighbors coming together, of strangers helping each other. We keep God's covenant by loving one another and holding onto hope.

Friday, April 3: *"But the LORD is with me, like a mighty champion: my persecutors will stumble...In their failure they will be put to utter shame, to lasting, unforgettable confusion."* (Jer 20:10-13)

Last Saturday, we heard Jeremiah ask God to take vengeance on those who sought his life. His request is followed by a description of the mortal violence he expects. In this chapter, he again describes the horrible punishment God will wield: *"lasting, unforgettable...confusion?"* Sure doesn't sound as awful as *"dying by the sword!"* But think about it: living your whole life in a state of confusion and coming to the end realizing you've never experienced truth. I'm afraid many of us live our lives in a state of confusion. We strive for control, following our own wills but never experiencing the peace found only in surrendering to God.

Today's Provision: Pray for the grace to surrender to God's will. The paradox is that surrender is a willed act. We cannot, on our own, really surrender. All we can do is pray for the grace, wisdom, and serenity to accept the blessings and trials each day brings, and the awareness of God's guidance in our lives. The more we do this, the more we incorporate surrender into our lives so that when we do relinquish our mortal bodies, we do so, not with confusion and uncertainty, but with peace grounded in truth. Pray today for the gift and the grace to surrender.

Saturday, April 4: *"I will make with them a covenant of peace; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them... My dwelling shall be with them..."* (Ez 37:21-28)

Beautiful, hope-filled words to end the week. I write this about two weeks before you read it, and when I reflect on what has happened over the last two weeks, I shudder. So much has changed in such a short time. By God's grace, perhaps things will have improved when you read this, but let's make sure we don't waste the lesson.

Today's Provision: Open your heart. Let us hold in our hearts the promise that God dwells with us as we "shelter in place." Let us be mindful of the millions who have no place of shelter, no safety net to protect them. Don't let this time of isolation harden your heart. Let faith and hope overcome your fears and doubts. Don't let apathy or politics or the individual rights we hold so dear keep you from doing what is needed for the common good. Instead, let's open our hearts to those who are alone, homeless, frightened. Let's support in any way we can the brave men and women who continue to be on the front lines: doctors, nurses, aides, fire fighters, and police officers, of course, but also grocery store checkers and truckers bringing in fresh supplies; public works folks who pick up our trash; people who continue to staff homeless shelters, food banks, and soup kitchens. These people are putting their own safety at risk for the greater good. And pray that as a nation and as a world, we come through this more united, more compassionate, more aware of God's covenant of peace, offered to ALL. Amen.