

TUESDAY : Effectiveness of the Word of God, Perfection of the Lord's Prayer in Forgiveness

The first 39 chapters of the Book of Isaiah contain very strong messages of judgment against the people of Israel and a call to repentance and holiness. God warned them through Isaiah, to come clean, because they were ignoring his message, to the point of war and even human sacrifice of infants which they picked up from intermarriage and adopting the ways of surrounding pagan peoples. God's law was flouted for depravity. Isaiah is God's mouthpiece and warns of the demise and captivity of Judah by foreign powers, yet comforts them with this hope: God has promised to provide a Redeemer. Rein in your exploits of sin and turn back to Him!

The last 27 chapters, by contrast, contain uplifting encouragement and consolation, forgiveness and hope to a nation now found in another situation. They have been captured, deported and are stripped of what makes them a nation: no Temple, their religion prohibited, and now are reminded of the enslavement of their earlier Egyptian plight as described in the book of Exodus. It is clear that their sin brought about this exile.

So God's word comes with power as a beacon of forgiveness, consolation and hope, in these latter passages of Isaiah, revealing his plan of blessing and salvation through a promised Messiah. Some of the most consoling words come from Isaiah 55, from which the Church has used the beautiful extract for our first reading today.

Even before today's first reading in chapter 55, we hear other familiar words used in the liturgy during the year, and which have become familiar to our ears, resonating in songs as well. It would be good for us to relate to them now:

***Come, all you who are thirsty,
come to the waters;
and you who have no money,
come, buy and eat!***

***Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without cost.***

***² Why spend money on what is not bread,
and your labor on what does not satisfy?
I will make an everlasting covenant with you,
my faithful love promised to David***

Here the prophet is telling God's people that his word costs nothing to buy but has more value and enrichment, refreshment and effectiveness than the surest of trusted food and drink. Why settle for anything less? And why? Because out of the infinite gratuity of God, He has made a covenant with his people. Not a pact but a covenant. God Yahweh has taken a risk but will not fail on his part, even if his people do; not tit for tat, but all the way in giving his word. When Jesus eventually comes, He gives Himself up as Word made Flesh on the Cross, yet still dwells among us because that Word made Flesh is in the eternal Memorial of His Love – the Eucharist. The Communion in the Blood of Christ has yet to unfold and will fulfill the thirst and the hunger Isaiah alludes to with a Value that is valueless, that no money can buy, but which is poured out freely *for the forgiveness of sin*.

So back to this point where Isaiah receives the grace to tell his people that God is making a covenant – He will keep His Word. *Infallibly*. You can take *it to the bank, folks*, and the bank will never fail! It is a call to trust as well. In fact the encouragement he relates is dependent on the act of trusting God and that our allegiance with Him yields so much more than our own labors could ever do. *Why spend money on bread, on labor that does not satisfy?*

What follows is also found in our readings and songs of the liturgical year:

⁶ **Seek the LORD while he may be found;**
call on him while he is near.

⁷ **Let the wicked forsake their ways**
and the unrighteous their thoughts.

Let them turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

With these familiar words, Isaiah urges the people to respond to God's gratuitous love: to open their hearts to the Lord, to seek Him in others, - to give up evil patterns, and especially sweep out evil designs on others. To create justice! Such encouragement and trust will prove true by obeying the silver rule: "don't do to others what you would not want done to you!" and then graduate to the golden rule: "Do unto others as you would have done unto you." This behavior steps up from mere tolerating; it is looking out for the other. "Am I my brother's keeper" Cain asked. Well, yes, you are!

But note also the urgency: "Seek the Lord while he may be found." It looks ahead to similar urgings when the sick looked for a way to be healed when Christ was Passing By! Or in Lent: *Now is the acceptable time*. Don't lose the moment. It may not occur again! Take advantage of an opportunity of grace, to do that extra thing for a friend or stranger . In turn these trusting moments spur us on to discover more clearly more opportunities before us: to anticipate the near occasions of virtue – what we can do for others – a very appropriate Lenten theme: Don't wait! Now is the acceptable time!

And then we hear the prophet continue:

⁸ **"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,/**
neither are your ways my ways,"

And how is that? Well now we get to the passage extracted in today's liturgy as follows:

⁹ ***“Just as from the heavens / the rain and snow come down And do not return there / until they have watered the earth Making it fertile and fruitful / giving seed to the one who sows / and bread to one who eats / So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth / it shall not return to me void But shall do my will / achieving the end for which I sent it.***

That's the effectiveness of God's word! The Church chooses this magnificent poetry for us today to assure his people, both Old Testament exiled nation; and New Testament Christian world gone awry, that his word is as sure as nature itself, like a weather cycle interlocking life, water, heavens, earth, planting, harvesting, fruition into verses that could hardly be more sublime. It is almost an echo of the sure power of God's creating Word in Genesis. He spoke and it came into being. Light, day, night, waters, land, animals, etc.

Here however is something more: the CYCLE. It is not just a one way creation, but rather an initiative by the Father, imaged as sending His word revered in the temple and transported as it were into the behavior of his people reflecting the honor of the word from the temple. The cycle was not just water, wind and the elements. It was internalized as a dialog with God Himself. As in nature water does not in turn does not slough off into some waste-like oblivion over some canyon and into the ground, but is borne up again into the atmosphere to God's bosom, the fruit of God and man's sowing and harvest together. That is covenant. That is what makes OUR God different from other religious deities, like the ancient Roman-Greek gods and goddesses capricious, moody, starting one thing and if mood befits them, they will continue expectations or if not, then watch out! Turn the wrong way, roll the dice and fortune will snatch you up.

No, that is not Yahweh, not our God, and it took a long time to get that through to His people. So Isaiah reminds them:

⁸ *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,”*

That reminder also means that God forgives, is not vindictive, does not hold grudges, and so many other human weaknesses of grace lost by Original Sin and snowballing over and over. Nonetheless, the prophet continues, mapping out God’s *plan to unfold*:

*You will go out in joy / and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills / will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field / will clap their hands.*

So this is the surrounding setting in which the Cycle of God’s word to us is described in today’s first reading. Celebration of the magnanimous and loyal steadfastness of God. That IS consolation amidst a world of ups and downs, often with more careening downward than upward flight, as people often feel the moments and hours in our days. Away with gloom and darkness; take on refreshment and security with the word of God, the enduring effective word of God. Not just efficient, but effective; not just dotting the “I”s and crossing the “T”s. But giving life and a perspective that causes his people – if they get it – to burst into song! To clap their hands in delight! Our bruised world needs more of that!

As if to revel in the joy and promise of this reading, the Responsorial Psalm cries out: From all their distress God rescues the just.

Distress: This is a word that is singled out in the liturgy of every Mass, after the Lord’s Prayer, as something to be delivered from, not to celebrate. De-

liver us from evil. And distress. Distress stands out as a particular roadblock to full communion, just as this word is better plucked out before receiving the Eucharist. “May we be always free from sin and safe from all distress, as we await the coming of our savior Jesus Christ....” Whom we receive within a few moments afterwards, in the Blessed Sacrament.

Towards the end of Lent when the drama of Christ’s arrest is nearing its time, John’s gospel has Jesus speaking of the seed that must be planted in the ground in order to bring forth new life, new fruit. That imagery from nature was familiar to those visiting Greek foreigners who were not otherwise at home with the Hebrew scriptures. Jesus chose that imagery to indicate a natural universal truth they could understand: sacrifice and death bring forth greater life, and He would endure that prediction shortly afterwards, giving total meaning to sacrifice on Calvary. The cross of Christ is the implanting of that seed into the earth. From it the Word of God, through the watering of the Holy Spirit brings life, resurrection, the First Fruits of Redemption. And THIS new phenomenon does not return to the Father VOID, but fulfilled, expiated, victory over sin achieved. As Isaiah acknowledges “It achieves the end for which I sent it.” “Into your hands I commend my spirit.” Irrigating the soil and pouring out blood upon the earth now producing the first fruits of redemption – and all that ripen spiritually through the ages.

So when Jesus presents His WORD as PRAYER, The Lord’s Prayer, he consummates that sacrifice as one offering Himself into the Hands and Heart of the Father. Not alone, but drawing others together as well – OUR Father. The Word of the Father speaks for us and with us in this prayer that comes from the Lord’s Heart. It is praise, worship, it is petition, asking daily sustenance; it is sorrow, forgiveness for our offenses, begged for as we carefully and freely attach our own willingness to forgive others in the bargain.

And it is thanksgiving, though this is not expressed directly in the Our Father itself. Yet Jesus demonstrated thanksgiving in his prayer in the Last Supper, so much that the very act of nourishing both daily bread and Eucharist became the Thanksgiving moment of the Church.

This is one reason why the Lord's Prayer always comes before our receiving the Holy Eucharist, as a perfect bridge between the Eucharistic Prayer and the reception of the Lord after consecration. So essential is that connection that even on Good Friday when there is no consecration, the Liturgy still includes the Our Father as a preparation to disposing the faithful to receiving the Lord in the Eucharist, the great Thanks for the Gift that keeps on giving from the infinite merits of the one unbloody sacrifice of the Cross represented throughout time and place.

In this sense the Our Father mirrors the complete CYCLE of the Old Testament reading from Isaiah to the New Dispensation: The Holy Spirit waters the community with gifts of virtue, and these saturate the community of believers to die to self and rise to the life of grace. The fruit of that cycled back to the Father in Heaven is now not just about bread, but about forgiveness, our forgiveness to others upon which condition we are calling God to forgive us in the first place for our own trespasses.

Brothers and Sisters, therefore beg for the gift of forgiving and forgetting, and it will dissolve the "distress" that we also beg the Lord to release from us. Pray for "*peace in our days*" as we await the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ! More than wars ending, souls converting, hearts humbled, vendettas tossed away, pride swallowed and lives defended and saved. Finally send back your forgiving heart back to the Father to complete the cycle as did Jesus: *Father forgive them, for they know not what they do!*