

## Second Sunday of Lent

March 4, 2007

### INTRODUCTION

Almost 4000 years ago, God made awesome promises to a man named Abram about how he would inherit much land, would have so many descendants they could not be counted, even how the whole world would be blessed through him. Abram had no evidence that these promises would ever be fulfilled. He asked God for some assurance that they would. So God gave Abram a special sign. It may seem complicated to us but it would have been easily understood by Abram. It was the way people made covenants or contracts in those days. The ritual of cutting an animal in half and walking between the halves was a symbolic way of saying "may the same thing happen to me as to this animal if I am unfaithful to my word." God is often represented as fire, and in this experience only God moved in-between the two halves of the animals. This indicated that God was not asking Abram to promise anything. God asked only for Abram's trust.

### HOMILY

As our lives move along, there are disappointments but there are also hopes and promises that we look forward to. Abram (later named Abraham) looked forward to the promise of land, many descendants and numerous blessings. In an ecstatic experience God assured him his hopes would be fulfilled.

Jesus had several times warned his apostles that he would suffer and die. Now he gave three of them a special experience to help them know what was ahead, that his death would lead to glory. It was a glory so wonderful that they didn't want it to stop. They wanted to set up tents on the mountain, not for themselves but for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, and they wanted to stay there indefinitely. But it wasn't to be. They still had to go through challenging and difficult times before they came to the glory they had seen. Matthew and Mark leave us in the dark regarding what Jesus was talking about with Moses and Elijah, but Luke tells us they were talking about Jesus' departure from this world by his death in Jerusalem. That departure is translated here by the word "exodus." Jesus had to leave this world to enter into the glory that was ahead. Luke has thus allowed us to see there is a definite connection between the transfiguration and Jesus' passion. Perhaps the experience of the transfiguration was meant to give strength and hope to Peter, James, and John, to help them survive Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. Perhaps it was a gift from God the Father to Jesus to help bolster his commitment to be faithful to his mission. Whatever it was, it was a promise of future glory and an assurance that God would not let down those who trusted in him.

When Peter wanted to put up three tents for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, it is always understood that he was enjoying this ecstatic experience and didn't want it to end, and this is true. But I wonder whether Peter, in his way of thinking, was making Jesus equal to Moses and Elijah. He said: "Let us make three tents," as if Jesus were a great leader on a par with Moses and Elijah. God the Father's words: "This is my chosen Son" let the apostles know that Moses and Elijah were great men and great prophets, but

Jesus is God's Son and no one could ever be on the same level with him.

If the transfiguration is a promise of future glory for Jesus and the Apostles, St. Paul gives us a promise of future glory for us when he tells us today "our citizenship is in heaven." We are only tourists in this world and it's not our true home. We must always have our bags packed because we never know when we will be called to move on. And we will be called. Paul tells us God "will change our lowly bodies to conform with his glorified body." We will be transfigured also. Lent helps us remember to be ready to move on and to make any changes in our lives we need to make, so we will be ready to meet our God in eternal glory.

Mass is always an assurance and a promise of what's ahead, especially in Communion. The consecrated bread and wine are Jesus' body and blood. We are reminded of his death for us. We are also assured that he hasn't left us orphans, but he is still with us and in Communion he wants us to be more closely united with himself. Someday we will enjoy perfect union when we will not have to experience him through signs and sacraments. We will know him directly and intimately. When we come to that stage, like the three apostles at the transfiguration, we won't ever want to leave. Unlike the apostles, we won't have to.

### **Third Sunday of Lent**

**March 11, 2007**

**INTRODUCTION** – Our psalm refrain, "The Lord is kind and merciful," describes our theme for today. We hear about God's desire to bring his people, suffering as slaves in Egypt, into freedom. He chooses Moses to be the one to demand and obtain their freedom. Moses wasn't happy to have to do this. He had escaped from Egypt himself because he had killed an Egyptian who had attacked an Israelite. Now God tells him he has to go back and deal with the Egyptian king. God gives Moses a special gift, God's name: "Yahweh," translated as "I AM." What is so special about that? It was like giving someone your private phone number. God was assuring Moses of a special relationship Moses would have with him and letting Moses know he could call on God whenever he needed him.

In our second reading Paul reminds us of how many blessings and marvels God's people experienced as God led them through the desert to the Promised Land. But in spite of all the wonderful things God gave them, they were unable to enter into the Promised Land. In the end they had failed to continue trusting in God. He tells us not to be like them.

The theme that "the Lord is kind and merciful" shows up again in the gospel in a short parable about a fig tree. It was given opportunities of every kind to produce fruit, but it failed to do so. "The Lord is kind and merciful," but he expects us not to take his mercy for granted. With the help of his kindness, he expects us to grow in goodness and holiness.

**HOMILY** – A young girl brought her boyfriend home to meet her parents. The parents couldn't find many good qualities about him. When the parents had the opportunity to talk to their daughter later, by herself, the girl's mother said: "Dear, he doesn't seem like a very nice person." "Mom," the daughter answered, "if he wasn't nice, why would he be doing 500 hours of community service?"

It's stretching things a bit to say "community service" fits into the theme of today's liturgy, but our readings remind us not to be like the fig tree in Jesus' parable today. We are to produce good works. God didn't create us just to take up space in this world. He wants more from us than that. He wants us to trust him, to love him and to do good for others.

I said in my introduction that the theme for today is "the Lord is kind and merciful." He is kind and merciful in many ways. One of the ways he is kind and merciful is in calling us to repentance and renewal. In the book of Revelation Jesus said: "Whoever is dear to me I reprove and chastise. Be earnest about it, therefore. Repent! Here I stand, knocking at the door. If anyone hears me calling and opens the door, I will enter his house and have supper with him, and he with me." This assumes that we all have room for improvement. God asks that of us and he also gives us the help we need to be better. That is kindness to us. He would not be kind if he didn't stimulate us to keep improving ourselves. The fact that he challenges us to change comes from his love as a caring parent. The parable of the fig tree is a call to live a positive life according to the gospel - doing good by loving God and others.

The conversation Jesus had about tragic events at the beginning of today's gospel was interesting. Sometimes people think when something bad happens to someone it is God's punishment. Jesus said that's not always true. He does not try to explain suffering here, but he is telling us not to be complacent, which we sometimes are. We can't think "well, if nothing bad is happening to me, it must be because I am so good." He tells us we all need to repent, i.e., to work to be better than we are.

This season of Lent keeps reminding us of our need to grow in holiness and goodness. Many people I have talked with do nothing special during Lent. They think they're good enough. Others start off Lent with a great deal of enthusiasm praying more, making sacrifices or doing good work. But as the weeks drag on, they ease up with their good resolutions. We still have four more weeks of Lent. Our readings today are encouraging us to do what we can so we can come to Easter with mind and heart renewed.

Today we have the first of three Scrutinies. Our community prays for those who are preparing to come into the Church at Easter so that they are better able to live the Christian way of life. May we all do a better job of living up to what God wants of us. We must remember, though, at all times, whether God is comforting us, forgiving us, healing us, blessing us, encouraging us or correcting us, "The Lord is kind and merciful."

**Fourth Sunday of Lent**

**March 18, 2007**

We just heard the story of a young boy whose life was misdirected by love of riches and pleasure. After his so called friends abandoned him and he suffered hunger and want for a period of time, he came to his senses and returned to his father. He returned a changed person. Fortunately, he had a loving and forgiving father who accepted him unconditionally. The point of the story is abundantly clear when we consider the relationship between the father and his younger son. As regards the relationship between the father and the older son, Jesus leaves the conclusion open-ended. We have to reflect on what might have happened, whether the older son gave in to his father's pleading to be forgiving or whether he refused. How we end the story will tell us a lot about ourselves.

I want to tell you about another young man whose story is somewhat similar. He was Catholic to start with but admits that he was not a very good one. His father was a government official and this young man enjoyed the comforts of those who were well off. He described himself at sixteen as a scatterbrained youth who had "turned away from God and did not keep his commandments." As his story goes, he was kidnapped and sold as a slave and made to labor on a farm for six years. Like the prodigal son who was without friends and who suffered without adequate food or shelter, this young man came to his senses and he learned obedience through what he suffered. He discovered (and we quote) "God showed me how to have faith in him forever, as one who is never to be doubted." After six years God spoke to him in a way that he heard with his own ears. He would escape and God audibly told him when to leave and what direction to go in order to accomplish his escape. Miraculously God protected him along the way until he arrived back home. Like the prodigal son, he came home a new person. Although his parents wanted to keep him at home with them, his love for God led him to want to serve God as a priest. Even more than serving as a priest, his love for others led him to want to return to the people who captured and enslaved him and teach them about God. And that he did. After overcoming many obstacles, including rejection by the hierarchy, a breach of confidence by a friend to whom he entrusted a confession of his past life, his lack of education and social graces, he returned as a bishop to the people who had enslaved him. Once he arrived he wasn't greeted with open arms. Again, in his own words, he said "daily I expect either murder, or robbery, or enslavement." He writes elsewhere "they seized me with my companions. And on that day they most eagerly desired to kill me; but my time had not yet come. And everything they found with us they plundered, and myself they bound in chains." He feared nothing, for even if he were to be put to death, he felt that would have been the supreme act of love for his God. But God had other intentions than that he should be a martyr. For 30 years he served God and the people who once enslaved him and his work was blessed. He ordained many bishops and priests, established convents, monasteries and schools and in thirty years saw the conversion of almost all of Ireland. And of course you all know I've been talking about St. Patrick, who is one of our patronal saints and whose statue is under the choir loft. His work was so successful that in a short time Ireland was sending out missionaries to revitalize the faith of Europe which had fallen into decline. Irish missionaries have been a blessing to the Church ever since.

For those who are Irish and who honor Patrick, the best way to truly honor him is not by drinking a

Guinness. We should respond to his example and his call to holiness. Again quoting Patrick, he asks those who believe in him and love him to “strengthen and confirm your faith...That will be my glory, for a wise son is the glory of his father.”

And for those who are not Irish and who think too much is made of St. Patrick on March 17th, I would like you to think of how our faith has been strengthened by the witness of many Irish saints and how our civilization has been preserved by the scholarship of the Irish during the days when mainland Europe was being overrun by barbarians. The great heritage of western civilization, from the Greek and Roman classics to Jewish and Christian works, would have been utterly lost were it not for the holy men and women of unconquered Ireland. These Irish recorded the great works of western civilization in their monasteries and convents (remember all books had to be written by hand). They brought this learning back to Europe after it began to stabilize in the eighth century under Charlemagne. Whether you're Irish or not, we all owe a great debt to the Irish and we pray that our patron, St. Patrick, blesses our parish and our families.

### **Fifth Sunday of Lent**

**March 25, 2007**

**INTRODUCTION** - Imagine you have been captured by radical Moslems in Iraq, and turned into a slave. Then God sends you a message through a holy person that you will soon be liberated and would be able to come back home. Well, if you can imagine how you would feel, you can imagine how the Jews felt when Isaiah the prophet spoke to them the words in today's first reading. At that time in history, 500 years before Christ, the land we now know as Iraq was known as Babylon. The Jews were their captives and slaves. God tells them their release from the Babylonians would be no less spectacular than their release from slavery in Egypt centuries earlier. Even as the prophet speaks, he tells them the road back to their own land is being made ready. God's statement “see, I am doing something new” leads us into the gospel, where we see Jesus taking a new approach to sinners. He did not come to condemn but to save. His kindness to a woman caught in adultery freed her from both the death sentence and from her sins.

**HOMILY** – It was God's law. In the book of Leviticus (20,10) and in the book of Deuteronomy (22,22), it states that if a man commits adultery, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death. The scribes and Pharisees who brought this woman to Jesus acted as if they were interested in observing the law, but they weren't. Otherwise they would have brought both parties to Jesus. The woman wasn't their target, Jesus was. They thought they had him trapped. If he said let her be free, they could accuse him of breaking the Law which he always respected. If he said put her to death, he would be contradicting all he had preached about mercy and forgiveness. In addition, if Jesus said she must be put to death according to the law, he would have been in violation of Roman law, which reserved capital punishment to the Roman governor. And the Romans ruled the Holy Land in the time of Jesus. They

thought they had Jesus cornered. No one knows whether he was really writing something or just stalling for time as he moved his finger in the dusty earth. But when they pressed for an answer Jesus said, "Let him who is without sin be the first to cast a stone at her."

I see two moral lessons worth noting in today's gospel.

The first lesson is the most basic of all. Every organization, from the small family unit to the world's largest nations, has to have laws. Without laws, chaos would reign supreme. And there has to be someone to enforce those laws, or they would be meaningless. Jesus observed all God's laws and taught others to do so. He even added a few of his own. But Jesus was able to balance law with mercy. Unfortunately, the notion of mercy is distorted in many people's minds today. They think God is so forgiving that it matters little as to whether they do what God wants or not. Notice Jesus told the lady, "Go, and do not sin again." In the minds of many people, God is an overly permissive parent but God is not. God is a good parent who cares and who loves us and who wants us to be good for our own well being and happiness. That is the first lesson in our gospel: God is merciful, but his mercy is meant to help us lead holier lives. It's not meant to be an excuse to follow the rules he gave us if we like them and ignore the ones we don't.

The second point in today's gospel is this: It relates to judging others. Some people have a responsibility to judge the behavior of others: parents, teachers, doctors, safety personnel like the police, managers, or anyone with authority. We judge the people we vote into office to govern us. That's the beauty of a democracy. We judge people whose behavior affects us in a negative way (like someone driving like an idiot on the expressway). When we make those kinds of judgments that's fair enough, but people don't need our anger, they need our prayers and a patrolman to convince them they can't drive like idiots. But sometimes we get carried away in our tendency to judge others. Especially we tend to consider ourselves better than others because they're not as smart, or as well off, or the same nationality as we are. So we pick up stones to throw at them, stones that frequently are not real stone, but verbal ones: destructive and negative words that tear down. Maybe they're words that we hurl at the offending party. Maybe they're words we pass on to others to hurt the other's reputation. Those destructive words (often called gossip) go around faster than a virus. We need to keep recalling Jesus' words: "Let him who is without sin be the first one to cast a stone at her."

If we consider ourselves as followers of Christ, we have the responsibility to live according to the moral lessons Christ taught us. But let us end with a word of comfort: when we get down on ourselves over our weakness and sins we must remember the Lord is always kind and merciful to those who turn to him for forgiveness.