

3rd Sunday of Lent C/2013

The readings of this third Sunday of Lent talk about the abundance of God's mercy and the necessity of repentance. They invite us to trust God's mercy and to repent of our sins.

The first reading describes the commission of Moses by God in order to liberate the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. It shows that at that time, as Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law, he saw a burning bush that was not consuming.

As he approached to see what was going on, God called him from the bush and gave him the mission to go and lead the sons of Israel out of Egypt. God also revealed his name to him and called himself as the God of their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

What is behind this text is the idea that God is sensitive to the suffering and pain of the oppressed people. That is why he cares for their wellbeing and wants to put an end to anything that harms them. There is also the idea that in order to fulfill this duty of care and mercy, God uses human beings as his instruments and mediators.

This text helps understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus invites us to repentance by considering God's patience and mercy towards us. First of all, the gospel starts with a story told to Jesus about some Galileans that Pilate murdered while they were sacrificing to God.

Taking advantage of that story, Jesus invites his listeners to repentance by telling them that those murdered were not the greatest of the sinners in the whole of Galilee. To that story he, then, added his own example of people who were killed in Jerusalem when a tower fell on them. As in the first case, he again invited his listeners to the repentance of their sins.

Finally, Jesus gave them a parable in which he told the story of a man who planted a fig tree in his orchard. For three years, he came to look for fruits, but found none. He, then, resolved to cut the tree because it was good for nothing. But, just as he took that resolution, his servant invited him to patience so that he might fertilize the plant in order to see if, this time, it can bear fruit in the future.

What do we learn from this Gospel? The first thing we learn is about the importance of repentance. In order to show how repentance is important, I want to tell you a story of a young man who repented of his past life to the point of becoming a priest.

In fact, in 1999, I met in Mississauga, in the diocese of Toronto, Canada, a young priest who was freshly ordained at that time. Before becoming a priest, he was working in a department store and was living with his girl friend in a condominium he has in the city.

One evening as he was out, he was involved in a severe car accident. By miracle he survived and he was transported to the hospital where he remained in the coma for more than a week. When he woke up, he did not remember what happened to him and listened to the stories told him by the witnesses and the family.

The fact of having survived death challenged him deeply. He understood that if God has spared his life, he wanted him to repent of his sins and to dedicate the remaining of his

life to something bigger than what he was doing up to now. That is how he left everything behind him and decided to become a priest.

I tell this story in order to remind us that if bad things happen to others and not to us, it is not because we are saints, but rather because God is merciful toward us. Therefore, the work of repentance is something we have to take seriously and do as possible as we are aware of our sins.

The second thing I want to highlight is about the amazing patience of God. Once again, let me tell you a story, but this time about myself. In 1985, as a young priest, I was involved in car accident. At that time I was teaching in our Junior Seminary. As an institution, we had a lot of financial problems and did not know what to do in order to resolve them.

One night, a student got sick and we had to drive him to the hospital. But, the only car we possessed had a mechanical problem with the brake. Though not fixed, there was nothing else to do than to go to the hospital with that car. By driving I was very careful, but on our way back, taken by sleep, I neglected to be cautious. Then, what should happen - happened. We had a severe accident. By God's grace, we made it and were alive, though the car was demolished.

A couple of days later, I was surprised by some students talking about the accident and saying that we were spared because we were not sinners. That allegation touched me a lot and I was pondering intensely about it. I looked deeply into my life and said to myself: "If I was spared, it was not because I was not a sinner, but because God had pity on me. He was patient with me and wanted to give me more time so that I may live according to his will. It was not because of our merits that we were spared, but rather because of his patience and mercy".

Once again, I tell you this story in order to remind us that we should not laugh at those who are in suffering as though they are struck by God because of their sins. We should not look at those who have misfortune in their life as sinful people. In truth, none of us can vent his merits before God. Let us look at our own background and appreciate God's patience and forgiveness. Psalm 130 tells us that if the Lord could count our sins, nobody would survive (Ps. 130: 3-4). We live by God's mercy.

This third Sunday of Lent reminds us of God's patience and mercy. It invites us to take advantage of this wonderful opportunity to work for our conversion. God wants us to be saved. He gives us always a second chance. Let us not neglect the grace he gives us in the sacraments and to use it for our eternal salvation. To delay for tomorrow what we can do today for our salvation is presumptuous and dangerous. May God bless you all!

Exodus 3: 1-8a, 13-15; 1 Corinthians 10: 1-6, 10-12; Luke 13: 1-9



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