

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT - C

March 24, 2019

First Reading – Exodus 3:1-8a;13-15

Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 103

Second Reading – 1 Corinthians 10:1-6;10-12

Gospel – Luke 13:1-9

My dear people of God:

We are now on the third Sunday of Lent. Our First Reading is from the third Chapter of the Book of Exodus. It tells us about the “Encounter of Moses and Yahweh”. In verse 5, the Lord ordered Moses to remove his sandals because he was standing on holy ground. Removing one’s sandals on holy ground is a very Oriental gesture. Easterners normally want to be connected totally with a holy ground; hence they remove their footwear. Incidentally, there is another significance of the gesture of removing one’s sandals among other traditional cultures: it means **being at home**. During this encounter, God reveals Himself to Moses from the midst of the burning bush. At this point, brothers and sisters, allow me to say that in verse 10, Moses encountered himself and his self-worth: from being a fugitive from the wrath of Pharaoh to becoming a messenger of Yahweh Himself. Moses called himself ***“an alien residing in a foreign land”*** in Exodus chapter 2, verse 22 when he named his son Gershom. Up to this time, Moses was a nobody in Midian, a foreign land. From being the adopted son of Pharaoh and enjoying royalty, Moses is now shepherding flocks - which is definitely a lowly job. He is now a hired-hand of Jethro, his father-in-law.

Thus, here at the mountain of God, where he was told to remove his sandals, Moses the “alien,” has at last found his “home.” Moses found his true home not with humans but with God, the God of his ancestors, ***“the God of Abraham...of Isaac... and of Jacob”*** in verse 6. He belonged there after all. The Lord is indeed kind and merciful, as today’s Responsorial Psalm tells us.

The burning bush marks the beginning of God’s direct intervention into the affairs of Israel’s History. It is the basis for the call of Moses to return to Egypt as Israel’s deliverer and the beginning of the end of Egyptian oppression.

Now, let us take a look at the episode of the burning bush: God speaks to Moses as the God of his forefathers: ***“I am the God of your fathers,”*** he

continued, *“the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.”* Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. But the LORD said, *“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 from the hands of the Egyptians and lead them out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey”* (Exod. 3:6-8). The “God of the burning bush” is a compassionate God.

Verses 9 to 12 have been skipped in our reading today, but I want you, brothers and sisters, to know that in verse 10, God commissioned Moses to be the man to lead God’s people out of Egypt. From being a nobody, Moses became a somebody – because of God’s initiative. But instead of being elated of his promotion, Moses questioned his own identity: *“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”* in verse 11. Moses is reluctant to take on the role that God asked of him. In verse 12, the Lord answered Moses by assuring him of His presence: *“I will be with you”*. I am sure, my dear brothers and sisters, that you will agree with me if I say that “what is important is *not the instrument in God’s hand*, but *the One in Whose hand the instrument is being held.*”

The second question which Moses asked after questioning his own identity was: “Who are you? He forgot that the Lord had just revealed Himself as the God of his forefathers in verse 6. Now the issue is no longer “WHO MOSES IS”, but “WHOSE IS HE”. If Yahweh is the SENDER, then the authority of Moses is connected to the SENDER who is YAHWEH HIMSELF. Moses belongs to Yahweh. YAHWEH’s name is the DYNAMIC GOD, the ACTIVE GOD. God is the owner of Moses.

The name by which God chose to identify Himself would capture the essence of His character and being. God’s answer to this question was, indeed, the basis for great assurance and hope: *“I AM WHO I AM”*. “This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you.” God also said to Moses, *“Say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation”* (Exod. 3:14-15).

Moses found himself and knew for certain “who he can be” after he was called by God to perform a task assigned to him by Yahweh Himself. At this

point let me state my favorite expression which I copied from Mother Teresa of Calcutta, the *great saint* of the slums of India. She said: “God does not call the able; He enables those whom He calls”.

The Responsorial Psalm beautifully sums up who the LORD is: The Lord is kind and merciful. These adjectives are not just descriptions; they are definitions.

Now, let us go to the Second Reading:

I wish to divide our second reading into three parts: In the first part, Paul is giving the Corinthians a beautiful and colorful reminder of what the Israelites experienced during their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. Paul recalled that their forefathers passed through the protective cloud of glory. He was referring to Exodus chapter 13, verses 21-22 about **the pillar of cloud that sheltered them from the brutal desert sun** during the day, and **the pillar of fire that warmed and protected them** during the night. This was a constant, ready reminder of God’s glory and presence among His people.

Paul also recalled their baptism – meaning their immersion into the waters – when they passed through the Red Sea. Paul used the expression **“they were baptized into Moses”** in verse 2. The Israelites experienced God’s incredible power in holding up the walls of the sea so they could cross over on dry ground. They saw God send the water back to drown the Egyptian army as narrated in Exodus 14:21-31.

The Israelites ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink; they were sustained by God’s miraculous provision of food and drink during their time in the wilderness as narrated in Exodus 16:35 and in 17:6. At this point, Paul injected his insights about the Eucharistic Celebrations that the Corinthians were having by saying that the Israelites drank from the Spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. Slowly, Paul is already introducing the concept that Israel had the presence of Jesus Christ with them in their sojourn before entering the Promised Land !

In the second part, Paul is telling the Corinthians that God was not well pleased with the Israelites’ forefathers. Despite all these blessings and spiritual privileges, the Israelites in the wilderness did not please God. In light of all those blessings, gratitude should have made them more pleasing to God, but they were not pleasing after all. Here Paul hinted at his observation in the way

Corinthians celebrated their Eucharist: the Corinthians took all sorts of liberties (like feasting and having orgies in pagan temples) thinking that they were “safe” because of past blessings and spiritual experiences (especially baptism and communion). This observation of Paul illustrated that not all the Eucharistic Celebrations of the early church was solemn and salvific.

In the third part, Paul is telling us that he warned his Corinthian community to beware, because just as Israel was blessed and had spiritual experiences, they still perished – and so some of the Corinthians might also perish. Obviously, the Corinthians had supposed that their being made partakers of the ordinances of the Gospel, such as baptism and the Lord’s Supper, would secure their salvation, notwithstanding that they might have been found partaking of idolatrous feasts and orgies.

At this moment, Paul is telling the Corinthians to take heed lest they fall. If some of them were not participating in the Eucharistic Celebrations solemnly, thereby mocking the Supper of the Lord, they were just going through the motions of what should have been a religious and salvific meal. Such a meal could bring disaster to their souls.

Brothers and sisters: To be better than the Corinthians, we must never think that it is easy to resist temptation just because we have been baptized and we have the Mass. Yes, God is faithful and He will not allow us to be tempted beyond our strength. But we must never play with the devil. We must stand on guard against temptation. The enemy will always make us think that it is okay to play with him from time to time. But Paul is telling us right now, that at any moment, we might be vulnerable and be at our weakest point. We are called to live in a manner that is faithful to the ONE Who is the very source of our life and existence. Living faithfully makes us witnesses to others for whom Christ also died.

Now, let us go to the gospel:

It would benefit us greatly if we take note of the incident prior to our gospel today. Let us listen to the warning of Jesus that He came not to bring peace, but division in chapter 12, verses 49 to 53. He made the crowds aware that they lacked the ability to interpret the signs of the times despite knowing how to read the sky for signs of impending weather in verses 54 to 56. God’s ways are beyond their comprehension. Is it because their minds were closed and they were short-sighted? Are we, people of this click and drag generation,

myopic too? We should know that Jesus wants to save us, not to condemn us. But we must value His actions for us.

Now, here are concrete signs of the times as told in chapter 13, verses 1 to 9. The evangelist Luke narrates two stories that call for repentance and one parable that demonstrates how patient God is with His creatures. These two are recent incidents.

Let us take a look at the first story: Obviously, Jesus was aware of a very recent brutality that Pilate, the governor of Galilee, had done because Jesus had a ready comment on the report. And what was the recent brutality? **MURDER and SACRILEGE.**

Galileans came to the temple to make their sacrifices. The Roman soldiers upon orders from Pilate killed them inside the Temple - a holy place. These soldiers profaned the altar by mixing the human blood of the slain Galileans into their sacrifice. It was a double whammy upon the fervent Jews: a sacrilege after a murder.

{By the way, talking about tragedies, please do not forget the four most recent tragedies: (1) the first is the carnage that an Australian did to our Moslem brethren in two mosques in New Zealand last week; (2) the second is the killing and mutilation of Christine Silawan in Cebu, Philippines; (3) the third is the killing of three persons in Utrecht in the Netherlands; (4) the fourth is the flooding in the MidWest after the bomb cyclone}.

To those who reported the brutality to Him, Jesus gave a very unexpected comment: ***"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!"***

At first glance, Jesus seemed to be unsympathetic to the victims. Such an atrocity should have caused a patriotic uproar and a strong protest on the part of the Jews against the Roman power. Was Jesus uncaring about Roman atrocities that hurt the psyche of the Jews? Please recall that in Nazareth, the townspeople tried to kill Him by hurling Him down the cliff when He spoke well of Gentiles (Luke 4:16-30). These Jews were very patriotic. They hated gentiles.

In our gospel today, my dear brothers and sisters, Jesus was more concerned about **the old assumption that sickness, handicaps, disasters (like death), were the result of sin.** Here the Lord taught them that those Galileans suffered not because of their sins. Please be aware that at this very moment, Jesus took the opportunity to teach the crowd to repent, lest they suffer for their own sins. In verse 3, Jesus warned them: ***“But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did”*** .

Far from condemning the Galileans who were killed by Pilate, Jesus taught the Jews that not every tragedy is the result of sin. Of course, we know that every sin leads to a very tragic end (which is separation from God), but here in our episode, Jesus taught them (and now He is teaching us) that as sinners, we ought to repent so that we might escape disaster.

Here is the second story. Jesus mentioned another disaster: those eighteen, on whom the tower in Siloam fell, and killed them. Jesus challenged His listeners: ***“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!”*** Did God punish those eighteen victims because of their sins? NO ! But, just like His teaching in the first story, the Lord teaches that those eighteen were not worse offenders than others. Here He sees the opportunity to invite the Jews to repentance. Obviously, His purpose is not condemnation but redemption.

Yes, we need to repent of our sins. Repentance helps us in life and in death; it helps us to live as forgiven people; it helps us to face death without fear. A Protestant preacher used to say: **“a tornado that destroys a nightclub also destroys a church; a tornado kills both the town drunk and a pastor.** Our repentance stands us in good stead when we experience unavoidable tragedy. It prepares us to live victoriously in the face of tragedy, and it also prepares us for death. We cannot prevent random tragedy. We need to realize that we need repentance.

And now, Jesus told them this parable: ***“There once was a person who had a fig tree planted in his orchard, and when he came in search of fruit on it but found none, he said to the gardener, ‘For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree but have found none. So cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?’ He said to him in reply, ‘Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future. If not you can cut it down.”***

Let us be clear in this: a vineyard is a common metaphor for the people of Israel, and the fruit to be expected from the Israelites is “Godly living”. Jesus’ listeners would understand this connection as Jesus tells this parable.

The Jews understood that the Book of Leviticus, chapter 19, verses 23 to 24 forbade them from eating of the fruit from a newly planted tree for three years because it was still ritually unclean. As a matter of fact, they could only eat of the fruit on the fifth year. The fruit of the fourth year should be dedicated to God “as an act of gratitude”. My dear brothers and sisters, here is an example of patience on the part of the tiller/gardener. He can only enjoy his harvest on the fifth year.

Perhaps, the fig tree in our parable may have been more than six years old. The point here is that after the long wait, it was not even productive. So, the owner was justified in ordering his tiller/gardener to cut it down. *“Why does it waste the soil?”* (verse 7b). The owner has waited long enough. But the tiller had a great patience in his work: *“He said to him in reply, 'Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future. If not you can cut it down.'”*

We know that Jesus, the Tiller of the Father’s orchard, is KIND and MERCIFUL as the Responsorial Psalm declared. The parable ends without Luke telling us whether the OWNER accepted the GARDENER’S offer, but Jesus is telling us with the notion that He does. Our judgment will take place under the watchful eyes of a Redeemer whose purpose is to SAVE rather than CONDEMN.

Amen.