

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT-C

April 7, 2019

First Reading – Isaiah 43:16-21

Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 126

Second Reading – Philippians 3:8-14

Gospel – John 8:1-11

My dear people of God:

On this fifth Sunday of Lent, all readings point towards HOPE in GOD.

1. In our First Reading, the Prophet Isaiah is inviting us to look at God as OUR HOPE.

2. Paul, in the Second Reading tells us that we must strive and hope constantly to be conformed to Christ.

3. In today's Gospel, Jesus gave hope to the woman caught in adultery. And implicitly, He also gave hope to *the Pharisees and Scribes*, the *“righteous people”* the very same hope to change their hypocrisy into truth/honesty. As they were assiduously insisting on observing the law of Moses, Jesus also wanted them *to see Him as the fulfillment of that very same law*. Brothers and sisters: Let us slowly interiorize those words of HOPE.

We are looking at the First Reading with grateful hearts to God who is never fed up with us. We place our hope in Him. The words of Isaiah encouraged the average Jews to look at Yahweh as the “Source of Hope” while they were in exile in Babylon. Some of them were born in Babylon and they had no experience of what it

was to be the “Chosen People” living in their own land. But all of them suffered to varying degrees the debilitating effects of being a conquered “Chosen People”. Isaiah tried to instill HOPE into the people of Israel. They longed for something - “to be home again”. They were far from home, far from freedom and far from hope. Obviously, Isaiah had to rekindle the trust and hope of the Jews in Yahweh while they felt the might and power of the conqueror - Babylon. He had to assure them that Yahweh was fully capable of taking on the Babylonian superpower down and that He would soon liberate them.

In verse 16, Isaiah begins with the familiar formula: “*Thus says the Lord.*” This formula is very reassuring because it conveys almost verbatim not just the words, but the entire persona of Yahweh. Yahweh will “*make a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters*”. Yahweh will “*lead out chariots and horsemen, a powerful army ... till they lie prostrate together ... snuffed out and quenched like a wick*” (Isaiah 43: 16). Yahweh will use the forces of nature to rescue His people.

Isaiah went to great lengths to encourage the people not to dwell in their bitter past, but to hope for something great in the future: “*I am doing something new*”. That “*something new*” talks about ‘*water in the wilderness*’ and the return of the exiles from Babylon.

He reminded them that God has pulled them through before. There is no reason to believe that Yahweh would not bail them out from their exile now: just as God parted waters and stopped chariots to free them from slavery; just as God provided bread from the sky and water from the rock to get them through the desert; and just as God made a way, where there was no way, **NOW, GOD IS ABOUT TO DO A NEW THING.**

My dear people of God: This is a wonderful assurance - and a very necessary one for us to hear in this current age when there is so much change and upheaval. Yahweh does not change. God’s grace

and power have sustained us in the past. He will certainly see us through the present and guide us into the future. **HE IS OUR HOPE.**

Now, let us take a look at our second reading:

Words like gain (*in Greek, kerdos*) and loss (*in Greek, zemia*) in verse 7 are key words to understanding Paul's holy reversal. Here Paul described his world to have turned upside down: the things that used to be important are no longer important now; and the reverse is true. The things that Paul used to detest, are now important to him. **THE CHRIST** whom he used to persecute has become his salvation.

For our benefit, we can recall some Holy and Great Reversals in the Bible:

*Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55).

* Jesus said, "But many will be last who are first; and first who are last" (Matthew 19:30; Matthew 20:16; Mark 9:35; 10:31, 44; Luke 13:30).

* In the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, the last hired became the first paid - and those who worked only a short time received the same wages as those who worked all day (Matthew 20:1-16).

Brothers and sisters, was Paul not a persecutor of Christians before? It is a great reversal that Paul, who once insisted on dragging believers of Jesus to prison with the belief that Christians did not adhere to the law of their fathers, now considers himself the advocate of believers. Paul reversed himself after encountering the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus (in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 9), and experiencing Christ's personal choice of him for an important ministry. As an aside, let me say this: ***God called Paul to take three missionary journeys, to establish several churches, to serve as an apostle to the Gentiles. His was certainly a life well lived.***

Paul's calling would not be all sweet and easy. He was imprisoned - in fact he wrote this letter to the Philippians from a prison cell. He was beaten with stripes and rods, stoned and got shipwrecked. He often found himself in peril - from Jews and from Gentiles alike.

Now, back to our second reading: Paul began his new affection for Christ. Paul had experienced the ***"supreme good"*** (in Greek, *hyperecho*) **of knowing Christ as Lord**, so that the things that he used to hold dear, no longer had any power over his heart. Eventually Paul re-assessed what was important and what was not important. His new and worthy affection shone so brightly that his old and unworthy affections faded into the background.

He even opposed the circumcision of Gentiles. There was reversal/upheaval in Paul's values after meeting the Risen Christ: ***"I count all things to be loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, my Lord"*** (verse 8b). As a matter of fact, he considered as rubbish/garbage (in Greek, *skubala*) other things that were opposed to ***"gaining Christ"*** (verse 8c). *Skubala* literally means "something that is thrown to the dogs; but in common usage, it means any worthless thing, such as garbage.

At this point, my dear people of God, let us ask ourselves: "Is it not true that we sometimes fail to see that our loss is outstripped by our gain?" Paul never failed to see that. He got his call/vocation at that very moment. He claimed that his ***"being conformed (in Greek, *summorphou*) to Christ's death"*** (in verse 10c), would make him attain resurrection. This Greek word ***"summorphou"*** is a combination of two Greek words: *syn* (meaning with) and *morphe* (meaning form/shape). Paul understood that our ***metamorphosis*** from being a suffering people to being recipients of eternal life **can come only by our being conformed into the crucified Christ.**

Lastly, we should not miss this last part of the reading. When Paul talked about ***“forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God’s upward calling, in Christ Jesus”***, he was referring to his personal struggle never to rest on his success. He constantly and consistently aimed more at being conformed into Christ by imitating Christ. We all know that an athlete who spends too much time polishing yesterday’s trophies isn’t likely to win another trophy tomorrow. And Paul was conscious of that danger.

Now, let us go the Gospel:

Verse 1 of chapter 8 of John’s Gospel started by saying that Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. But very early in the morning, he came again into the Temple, and all the people came to Him. He sat down, and taught them.

We will not grasp what the first verse means unless we go back to chapter 7, verse 53 that says: ***“Everyone went to his own house”***. Right after that, verse 1 of chapter 8 says: ***But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives”*** (John 8:1). There is a “BUT” here. Verses 44 to 52 of chapter 7 would tell us that the Pharisees were trying (though unsuccessfully) to figure out how to deal with Jesus. The temple police, whom the Pharisees sent to arrest Jesus, failed to do so (in verse 45), because ***“No man ever spoke like this man”*** (in verse 46). A sincere, straight-thinking, and an honest Pharisee named Nicodemus (who was mentioned earlier in chapter 3, verses 1 to 21) tried to defend Jesus, asking, ***“Does our law judge a man, unless it first hears from him personally and knows what he does?”*** in verse 51, but the rest of the Pharisees replied, ***“Are you also from Galilee? Search, and see that no prophet has arisen out of Galilee”*** (in verse 52).

Let us go back to verse 53 of chapter 7 which says: ***“Then everyone*** (meaning every Pharisee) ***went to his own house”***, and connect this to verse 1 of chapter 8: ***“while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives”***. The day ended with the scribes and the Pharisees

being unsuccessful in their quest for accusing Jesus. These religious leaders had an unfinished business.

We are not told by the evangelist John why Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. But my dear brothers and sisters, you could easily guess that He went there to pray. And the evangelist Matthew can give us some insights about the several occasions when Jesus went there with His disciples (Matthew 21:1; Matthew 24:3). Let us not forget that the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed and where He was arrested (Matthew 26:30), is located on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives. It is easy to guess that Jesus went to the Mount of Olives to pray that night. It is even possible that, since Bethany was not far, Jesus stayed overnight at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus; and went to the Temple the following morning. And this is where we started.

Please recall that earlier Jesus has been teaching in the temple (in chapter 7, verse 14). And in today's episode in chapter 8, verse 2, Jesus is doing that: ***“All the people came to Him, and He sat down and taught them”***. His popularity with the common people is one of the reasons why the religious leaders were envious and angry with Him.

Verse 3 would tell us that the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery. Having set her in the midst, they told him, ***“Teacher, we found this woman in adultery (Greek: moicheia), in the very act. 5Now in our law, Moses commanded us to stone such. What then do you say about her?” They said this testing (Greek: peirazontes from peirazo) him, that they might have something to accuse him of. But Jesus stooped down, and wrote on the ground with his finger.***

I want you dear brothers and sisters to get a good grasp of verse 4: ***“Teacher, we found this woman in adultery, in the very act”***. “TEACHER” would ordinarily be a respectful form of address, but in this case it is part of their scheme to entrap Jesus. First, they pretentiously ***“acknowledged”*** Jesus as an authority of Scripture.

Then they presented Him with a problem that they believed would entrap Him. Scribes were expert interpreters of the Torah. Pharisees were well-known for their careful observance of the law.

The question is whether this woman was guilty of adultery or not. Let us be sure of our issue here: it is adultery. The Greek word used here for adultery was, “moicheia”.

The scribes and Pharisees were “eager” to know the opinion of Jesus regarding the Mosaic Law. The Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 22, verses 22 to 24 prescribed **stoning to death as the penalty** for these sins of the flesh; regardless of the marital status of the woman. This story makes no mention of the man who should also be stoned to death with the woman.

These scribes and Pharisees did not need the man to pin down Jesus for their nefarious purposes and sinister plans. It was really Jesus who was on trial here. Why? Because the scribes and Pharisees have seen Jesus being merciful to sinners. They hoped to show that He has strayed beyond the bounds of the law by being merciful to sinners. The scribes and Pharisees viewed this woman, not as a human being, but **as a tool that they can use to entrap Jesus**. They care nothing about her as a person.

They first stated the obvious: the penalty associated with adultery in the Mosaic Law. Then they asked Jesus for His opinion:

(1). If Jesus says that the woman should not be stoned, they can bring charges against Him for subverting Mosaic Law.

(2) But if He says that she should be stoned, His decision will cost Him the support of the common people who would be offended by the strict adherence to this Mosaic Law - a law that was honored mainly in the breach than in the observance. A decision to stone the woman might also bring Jesus into conflict with Roman authorities, because Rome alone has the authority to impose capital punishment.

The evangelist John tells us that ***“they did this to test (peirazontes-from peirazo) Him, so that they might have something to accuse Him of”*** (in verse 6a). We must not miss the point here: John makes it clear: these people are the enemies of Jesus; their motive is to entrap Him. We know that scribes and Pharisees enforce Mosaic Law as a way of expressing their devotion to God. However, in this particular case, their primary motivation is to pin down Jesus. What was the opinion of Jesus? He did not say anything. Instead, He ***“stooped down, and wrote on the ground with His finger”*** (in verse 6b).

What did Jesus write? Was He just stalling ? buying time to enhance the drama of the moment ? Was He writing a verse of the Book of Deuteronomy ? Was He writing the names of the scribes and Pharisees and listing their sins next to their names. I do not know. What I do know is that Jesus wrote on the ground.

But they insisted on asking Him. So, He looked up and said to them, ***“He who is without sin (Greek: anamartetos) among you, let him throw the first stone”***. Again He stooped down, and with His finger wrote on the ground.

The law specifies, ***“The hand of the witnesses shall be first on him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people”*** (Deuteronomy 17:7).

We do not know whether the scribes and Pharisees witnessed the adultery or not. Were they peeping toms? Were they worse than the accused? If they witnessed the offense, they should have cast the first stone. But, it would put them into a bad light. How did they catch the adulterous pair? Perhaps, other people may have witnessed the offense and brought the woman to the public.

In this particular moment, Jesus was kind to the accusers. He bent down again - not wanting to see who would cast the first stone. He invited any of them who was without sin to cast the first stone. He was kind by giving them HOPE to get rid of their hypocrisy and self-righteousness and appreciate the mercy of God to

sinners. They knew that they brought the woman to Jesus as a tool for them to entrap Him. They knew that they themselves were also guilty of sin - including sexual sin. They knew that the challenge of Jesus brought them face to face with their own guilt. ***“Again he stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground”*** (verse 8).

Or was He kinder by not looking at their faces, as they, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning from the oldest (***Greek: presbyteros***), even to the last? The presbyters or the more experienced among the scribes and Pharisees saw quickly that they were outflanked. They deemed it better to retreat rather than to stand and argue with SOMEONE who so easily turned their most potent challenge to His own advantage. Their quiet retreat showed their guilt.

Jesus was left alone with the woman, in the middle. I would love to imagine that, if we were present with the crowd who listened to the teaching of Jesus at that moment, we would have applauded Jesus and the woman. They did not leave because they were not the accusers; they wanted to learn from Jesus, even though a number of them may have been sinners too.

Jesus, standing up, saw her and said, ***“Woman, where are your accusers? Did no one condemn you?”*** She said, ***“No one, Lord.”*** Jesus said, ***“Neither do I condemn you. Go your way. From now on, sin no more.”***

Jesus straightened up from the bent posture. This time, though, He did so, not to face His opponents, but to face this woman. His opponents, having quit the field, were nowhere to be found. Jesus did not ask the woman whether she was guilty, but only whether anyone has condemned her. He knew and she knew that she was guilty. In fact He told her to go and sin no more. She was guilty, but Jesus neither condemned nor excused her. He gave her not only words of non-condemnation and a warning not to sin anymore, but

most important of all, He offered her a HOPE for a new life: a life now lived to obtain Eternal Life.

That offer is given to us today too. May we never reject such offer. We only need to repent from our sins, no matter how grievous they may be. Do not forget, we are a people of HOPE. Amen.