

Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings

Preparing for Lent, 2021



"Rend your hearts, not your garments, and turn back to the Lord your God." (Jl 2:13)

"Metanoia" is our theme for the whole year, but particularly in Lent. The Greek word has a few nuances.

It refers to changing our hearts which involves turning away from sin and back to God.

But the focus of the prophets was not so much on individual sin –

the people had the commandments to which they could refer in their personal relationship with God and others.

The prophets preached about societal sin, just as our current-day prophets do.

Let's ask ourselves this Lent, "Where am I complicit in the sins of society?" A much harder task indeed.

Sunday, February 14: *"Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Avoid giving offense...Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ."* (1 Cor 10:31-11:1)

The first line of this passage makes sense to me. AMDG -- Ad maiorem Dei gloriam, "for the greater glory of God" – is the motto of the Society of Jesus, founded by St. Ignatius of Loyola. Being a "contemplative in action" is what those who follow the teachings of St. Ignatius strive for -- to be aware of, and to do, in our everyday activities, what is for the greater glory of God. (That's not to say we're always successful, but it's a good goal!) It's the "avoid giving offense" by being imitators of Paul and Christ I don't understand. The Gospels, especially Luke's, and Acts (also written by Luke) are full of stories of people being offended by what Jesus, Paul, and the other Apostles say. But note: they are offended by what is said and what is said is the truth. *"The Scriptures can often offend, but they are not meant to offend. They are meant to challenge. They only offend us if we do not want to be challenged."* (Walter Modrys, S.J.)

Today's Provision: Speak the truth. This can be tough. Political correctness is rampant, most times for good reasons. Let's be aware of what we say and how we say it so as not to hurt another personally or condemn or judge them. But it can also be a convenient excuse for us to keep silent on injustice and other societal sins. Psalm 85 tells us, "Kindness and truth shall meet." The truth is the truth and we should be proud to announce it kindly, without malice.

Monday, February 15: *The LORD then said: "What have you done! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the soil!"* (Gn 4:1-15, 25)

"But who is my brother? Who is my sister? Who are your children, Lord, for whom I am called to be a 'keeper?' Those in my immediate family? Those in my neighborhood who look or worship or vote like me? Citizens of my own country? Who are my mother and brothers and sisters? Who is my neighbor?" *"Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."* (Lk 8:21)

Today's Provision: Care for all God's children. Do we allow the blood of the over 3 million children who die of starvation each year – one every 10 seconds -- cry out to us? (UNICEF, 2018). It's easy for those in affluent countries to ignore these deaths that occur in poverty-stricken corners of our world. How about the 40,000 or so civilians who die in wars and armed conflicts around the world, or the close to 40,000 people who die from gun violence in the US each year? Their blood cries out, but are we willing to hear? We may lament, we may even cry. But do we act? Do we take a stand through advocacy? What will you do this Lent to listen to the cries and to fast from indifference?

Tuesday, Feb 16: *Jesus enjoined them, "Watch out, guard against the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod."* (Mk 8:14-21)

Jesus says these words after he has fed the thousands, and right after he has dismissed the Pharisees who ask for a sign from heaven. Even his disciples don't see that feeding thousands from a few loaves and fish might just be a sign! He warns them about the "leaven" of elders. What does he mean? The elders aren't all bad; most of them have good intentions. They are just trying to keep the tenuous peace with the governing authorities that allows them to practice the rituals of their faith. But what are these religious leaders sacrificing to keep that peace and keep their rituals? Their leaven is old, worn out, no longer life-giving. It is time for the new leaven of mercy and love.

Today's Provision: Guard against old leaven. There are wonderful things in every faith practice that are of old, traditions and teachings that have stood the test of time. But God tells us, *"I am making all things new."* The Holy Spirit works in mysterious and wonderful ways to make each one of us a new creation. But being a new creation means change and change is hard work. Be aware when the old leaven, the old habits become an impediment to rising to the call God gives you today!

Wednesday, February 17: *"But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to be fasting, except to your Father. And your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you."* (Mt 6:1-6, 16-18)

The Greek word, translated as hypocrites in this passage, is actually "play actors!" That makes me feel better...all those times I fail to live up to the message I preach! I'm not a hypocrite—just a play actor! When I read this passage today though, what comes to mind are the people in the world who suffer in silence, who put on a good face for others to see when they are actually falling apart inside. Jesus is talking here about fasting, a volitional act done to bring our attention to our blessings and the suffering of others. He is not saying those with illness, depression, or anxiety should keep their suffering hidden. This is particularly important during these days of isolation.

Today's Provision: Fast from Ambivalence. Perhaps you know someone who doesn't seem to be themselves these days, saying everything is fine, but with sadness in their voice. Maybe they live in your house. Or maybe you are aware of someone who is alone all the time. It's easy to think, "Well, it's none of my business," or "They would let me know if they wanted to talk." Fast from excuses not to reach out. You don't have to pry. Just bring a friendly voice AND open ears. And if you are one who could use a friendly voice and listening ear, reach out. Don't suffer in silence. And know that your Father in heaven sees what's hidden and will comfort you. Just ask.

Thursday, February 18: *"I call heaven and earth today to witness against you: I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life..."* (Dt 30:15-20)

A few weeks ago, I attended a virtual event focused on violence interruption in the city near where I live. During the Q&A, someone brought up that this topic is an important pro-life issue, and one of the speakers—an incredible man who works on the street corners and alleyways of the city, helping to diffuse violence—had a revelation: "Oh, this is why I am on this panel," he said. "Yes, this is a pro-life cause!" "Choose life" is a phrase aptly used by those opposing abortion, but it applies to all life, as explained in the first tenet of Catholic Social Teaching, "The Life and Dignity of Every Human Person." Choosing life means modeling ourselves after Jesus, asking that over-used but oh-so-valid question, "What would Jesus do... if he were faced with this situation, this issue, this societal sin?"

Today's Provision: Choose life. What does "choosing life" look like for you? We have different answers, and unfortunately, at least in the US, that often means we are politically estranged. Let's try to bridge that divide and be "repairers of the breach" (see Saturday's scripture). Let's choose to respect each other by finding common ground.

Friday, February 19: *"This is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; Sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; Clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own."* (Is 58:1-9)

This passage from Isaiah is a good explanation of social justice and charity, and why both are important. Another well-worn expression comes to mind: "Give a man a fish and he eats for a day; teach a man to fish and he eats for a lifetime," the former a representation of charity and the latter of social justice. But I suggest this needs to be expanded. You cannot teach someone who is starving to death a new skill. Nutritious food, clean drinking water, and adequate shelter are the charitable things needed to make education effective. And just as important: teaching a man to fish won't do much good if his rivers and lakes are polluted or running dry due to climate change.

Today's Provision: Give of yourself AND work for justice. This is not an either/or; it is a both/and, but it's disheartening how it becomes entangled with politics: "When I feed the poor, they call me a saint, but when I ask why the poor are hungry, they call me a communist." Dom Helder Camara, Archbishop of Recife, Brazil. God expects both charity and justice. To do one without the other can ultimately be self-serving. There are many organizations that allow you to participate in both. Find one that speaks to your heart and give it your all.

Saturday, February 20: *"Repairer of the breach," they shall call you, "Restorer of ruined homesteads."* (Is 58:9-14)

A modern-day prophet we alluded to in our lead-in to Lent is the Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II, President & Senior Lecturer of *Repairers of the Breach*, and Co-Chair of the *Poor People's Campaign*. By way of disclaimer, not everyone will agree with this US organization's mission. Some will likely label it socialist or communist (as per the quote yesterday); I understand why due to the partisan, nationalistic fever of many religious institutions. Another modern-day prophet is, of course, Pope Francis, who encourages us to be involved politically with respect for those with whom we disagree. We know households have been ruined due to politics. The breaches seem so wide that the word "schism" has been mentioned within Christian communities. What will you do to be a "repairer of the breach?"

Today's Provision: Be a restorer of peace. We are seeing violence from all sides of the political and religious divide. I have heard some quote Jesus when he said he did not come to bring peace, but the sword (Mt 10:34-36). Jesus says this not because that is what he wants; he knows the battle between good and evil will persist, and he knows the violence of our human nature inherited from Cain. Violence begets violence begets violence. Everyone loses. No one wins. Pray with me today that God will lead us to be peacemakers, not as doormats, but through the power of love, understanding, and truth.