

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Feb 13th 2016

“If you do the impossible then I will do the impossible as a reward for you.” This could be our initial response to our First Reading for this Eucharistic liturgy. All the invitations begin with the big “If” are definitely human tendencies. “Oppression, false accusation, malicious speech, if you bestow your bread on the hungry satisfy the afflicted,” are just openers. Just one of those would be a full-Lenten project for most of us. “If you hold back your foot on the Sabbath from following your own pursuits on My holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord’s holy day honorable, if you honor it by not following your , seeking your own interests or speaking with malice” finish the list. There are seven of these insults to our comfortable habits and selfish behaviors. Counting these Ash-Wednesday days, there are also seven weeks in Lent. one week per sin would eradicate our sinfulness and render us available for the wonderful rewards promised by the Lord who has told us what is expected.

This Reading is the second half of yesterday’s First Reading from the prophet Isaiah. The rewards are quite attractive, blooming, light, guidance always, plenty to eat, strength and abundant fertility and the reception of names of honor will be granted. It does sound like promises made to those beginning a contest or Boot Camp, or persons beginning a weight-loss program at a Fat Farm. It all does sound as if it is all up to our good wills and the results will be worth the struggles.

Perhaps the reading from Luke’s Gospel will help us view Lent differently. I hope so. There is good news for us in the very first verse. Levi, a collector of taxes for the dominating and ruthless Roman Empire is called out from behind his counting table to follow Jesus. Apparently after some time, moments, days, or seven weeks, Levi through a dinner for Jesus and a large number of fellow money-men as well as other sinners. Jesus, it seems, did not hit them with the Big Seven “Ifs”, but accepted His being welcomed as the “Invited Inviter”. Jesus would grow quite familiar with the uninvited Pharisees who while observing the Law were also always observing Jesus’ inobservances.

The Law the Pharisees cherished was the Holy Law of Moses and these men found their holiness by keeping every little legalism. They find it so hard to see Jesus seeming to encourage tax collectors and other sinners by actually eating with them, quite unholy! Jesus hears their questioning of His disciples so He drops a Good News bumper-sticker saying on them which sums up His whole salvific mission. Jesus has come to encourage repentance as does a doctor come for the sick. The question is just who are the healthy and who are the sick?

Jesus is not the bailiff urging the guilty to the bar of Justice for examination and punishment. He is the Divine Inviter to the table of relationship. This relationship with Levi, the disciples and other wanderers will result in changing the “If yous” of the First Reading to the “When yous” reflective of such a relationship. “When you stop malicious speech.... When you feed the hungry... when you live with the ways of Jesus, then you will not be rewarded, but surprised! Jesus promises real life as a relational blessing. God does not repay, reward, trade. Jesus extends in His mercy the ongoing creational love which is all that God is.

A love-relationship moves from “if” to “will”, from “have to” to “want to”. The repentance to which Jesus is calling us is from self-idolatry to self-reverence. This reverence allows us to not spent our lives protecting our identities, our possessions, our everything as if they really were ours. Self-reverence is

the acceptance of the holiness of God shared with us, within us and which desires to be manifested as all of God desires. When we reverence what has been given and is ours only as temporary possessors, then the “when” and the “will” walk together.

These days of Lent are meant to be spent walking with those entering the Church through their Easter baptisms. Our repentance as a personal project is impossible, but the grace offered us by His relationship with us will allow for the possible. We walk with Jesus who reverences our humanity for what it is, a Gift from God and reverences our humanity for all it will be through His redemptive life, death and resurrection.

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