

FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK



FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT – April 2, 2006 B

GOD HAS A POOR MEMORY FOR OUR SINS

Today's first reading ends with these consoling words:

"I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more."

When people confess sins that they have already received absolution for it is as if they do not believe that God has forgiven them. The truth is that once we have shown even *imperfect* sorrow for our sins, we are forgiven. 'Fear of losing heaven' and 'the fear of going to hell' would be *imperfect* contrition. *Perfect* contrition is being sorry because we offended and failed our God who loves us so much. Isn't it very good news to know that God has a poor memory for our sins once we have repented of them.

Years ago, I heard a cute story that underlines the truth of the verse from Jeremiah. A young lady came to see her pastor to tell him that Jesus had started to appear to her. Needless to say, the priest was skeptical. After several meetings the priest came up with a 'brilliant idea'. He said to the young lady: the next time Jesus appears to you, ask him what are the sins of the parish priest. Obviously, the priest would be very impressed (and maybe also very embarrassed) if the young lady was able to accurately name her pastor's sins. So he could not wait for the next meeting. When she returned he asked: "Well, did you ask Jesus my question?" The young lady said 'yes, I did.' "And what did he say." He said that he had forgotten your sins. Wow! The priest was really surprised and awe struck by the answer. I think we would be too.

Of course, remembering some sins is not all bad—especially when such remembering helps not to fall into them again. Hopefully, the alcoholic's clear memory of how miserable he was while drinking should help him not to ever drink again. Today's second reading also has a verse that is important for us to reflect on. The author of Hebrews says:

"Jesus offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears."

This is a beautiful image of Jesus being very vulnerable before God. Perhaps too often our prayers are too stoic and intellectual and devoid of all emotion. Nothing in our faith formation may have taught us that it was okay to be "emotional" and all teary-eyed before God. If sometimes we think that God is remote and distant, we should keep the above verse in mind.

Someone once said "there is nothing that we suffer that has not first passed through the heart of God in Jesus: poverty, exile, betrayal, loneliness, rejection, abuse by others, abandonment by others etc. Isn't it consoling to

know that our God does indeed know in his heart everything we experience and feel. Can you imagine how the memory of this would help our relationship with God in times of trial.

Today's Gospel has several verses worth reflecting on—some of them very challenging. For example, look at the following verses.

"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit."

"Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life."

**Whoever serves me must follow me,
And where I am, there also will my servant be.
(John 12:23-26)**

Commenting on the above verses, the late Scottish scripture scholar, William Barclay calls the verses *The Amazing Paradox*, which he explains in this way:

What was this amazing paradox which Jesus was teaching? He was saying three things, which are all variations of one central truth and all at the heart of the Christian faith and life.

1. He was saying that only by death comes life. The grain of wheat was ineffective and unfruitful so long as it was preserved, as it were, in safety and security. It was when it was thrown into the cold ground, and buried there as if in a tomb, that it bore fruit. It was by the death of the martyrs that the Church grew. In the famous phrase: "The blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church."

It is always because people have been prepared to die that the great things have lived. But it becomes more personal than that. It is sometimes only when a man buries his personal aims and ambitions that he begins to be of real use to God. Cosmo Lang became Archbishop of Canterbury. At one time he had had great worldly ambitions. A godly friend's influence led him to abandon these and enter the Church of England. When he was studying for the ministry at Cuddesdon, one day as he was praying in the chapel he heard unmistakably a voice saying to him: "You are wanted!" It was when he had buried his personal ambitions that he became useful to God.

By death comes life. By the loyalty which was true to death there have been preserved and born the most precious things which humanity possesses. By the death of personal desire and personal ambition a man becomes a servant of God.

2. Jesus is saying that only by spending life do we retain it. The man who loves his life is moved by two aims, by selfishness and by the desire for security. Not once or twice but many times Jesus insisted that the one who hoarded his life must in the end lose it, and the one who spent his life must in the end gain it. There was a famous evangelist called Christmas Evans who was always on the move preaching for Christ. His friends besought him to take things easier but his answer always was: "It is better to burn out than to rust out." When Joan of Arc knew that her enemies were strong and her time was short, she prayed to God: "I shall only last a year, use me as you can." Again and again Jesus laid down this law (Mark 8: 35; Matthew 16:25; Luke 9:24; Matthew 10:39; Luke 17:33).

We have only to think of what this world would have lost if there had not been men and women to forget their personal safety, security, selfish gain and selfish advancement. The world owes everything to people who recklessly spent their strength and gave themselves to God and to others. No doubt we will exist longer if we take things easily, if we avoid all strain, if we sit at the fire and husband life, if we look after ourselves as a hypochondriac looks after his health. No doubt we will exist longer—but we will never live.

3. Jesus is saying that only by service comes greatness. The people whom the world remembers with love are the people who serve others. A certain Mrs. Berwick had been very active in Salvation Army work in Liverpool. She retired to London. Then came the war and the air raids. People get queer ideas and the idea got about that somehow Mrs. Berwick's poor house and her shelter were specially safe. She was old now; her Liverpool days of social service were long behind her; but she felt she must do something about it. So she got together a simple first-aid box and she put a notice on her window: "If you need help, knock here." That is the Christian attitude to our fellow men.

Once a schoolboy was asked what parts of speech "my" and "mine" are. He answered—more truly than he knew—that they were aggressive pronouns. It is all too true that in the modern world the idea of service is in danger of getting lost. So many people are in business only for what they can get out of it. They may well become rich, but one thing is certain—they will never be loved, and love is the true wealth of life.

Jesus came to the Jews with a new view of life. They looked on glory as conquest, the acquisition of power, the right to rule. He looked on it as a cross. He taught that only by death comes life; that only by spending life do we retain it; that only by service comes greatness. And the

extraordinary thing is that when we come to think of it, Christ's paradox is nothing other than the truth of common sense.

Barclay's Commentaries on the New Testament

For those of you interested in learning more about the Bible and are not familiar with the Barclay's *Daily Study Bible Series*, I write the following:

William Barclay was an Anglican. His commentaries on the New Testament are probably the most popular and widely used commentaries on the New Testament for all Christians belonging to mainline churches. They were a favorite of Bishop Fulton Sheen. Why are Barclay's commentaries so popular? I like them for two reasons:

- He does a great job at explaining the text in a *simple and easy to read way*. Often he will give some very interesting background on a text.
- Most of the time he connects the reading with our daily lives - often giving us *inspirational* material or examples of people *living* out the text. The above piece is an example of the latter.

Each of his commentaries has the text of the Gospel or Epistle that he writes about. Unfortunately his commentaries are only on the New Testament. On the downside, we might say that his commentaries are not Catholic. Probably 97% of the time this is not a problem.

Second, his commentaries on the Gospels of John and Matthew are a bit long. He has *two* volumes on both of these gospels.

If you are not familiar with Barclay's *Daily Study Bible Series* and think you would like to try one of them, I suggest you begin by ordering his commentary on the gospel of *Mark* and his commentary on the *Acts of the Apostles*. Mark's gospel is the shortest gospel and it is the one we are reading this year in church (Cycle B). (During the Easter Season we will not be reading Mark. We always listen to John's gospel during seven weeks of the Easter Season.) But during the Easter Season, our first readings is always from the *Acts of the Apostles*.

Have a great Week,

