



Third Sunday of Lent February 28, 2016 C

- ❖ **Standing on Holy Ground**
- ❖ **The Danger of Spiritual Cockiness**
- ❖ **The Parable of the Second Chance**

Today's first reading is the call of Moses. Reflecting on this reading, Fr. Flor McCarthy writes:

In the story of the burning bush God appears to Moses, not in a temple, but in the wilderness. And he appears, not while Moses was praying, but while he was minding his sheep. It was in this secular place, and while he was engaged in a secular task, that God made his presence known to him.

Today the world has become a very secular place. It is difficult to retain a sense of the sacred in such a world. Yet without the sacred, without a sense of the transcendent, life is bleak and one-dimensional.

Moses' encounter with God seems to be dominated by fear. However, this is not so. When the Bible talks about fear of God it doesn't mean being afraid of God. It really means a sense of awe and reverence before the mystery of God. Fear is a negative thing; it constricts us and makes us want to run away. Awe, on the other hand, is a positive and expansive feeling; it draws us to the awe-inspiring object, and makes us want to linger. We stand in admiration of something greater than ourselves. We are at once humbled and elevated.

Religion begins with a sense of reverence, the recognition of God's greatness and our limitations. Awe and reverence precede faith. They are the root of faith. Awe is the beginning and gateway of faith.

Awareness of the divine begins with wonder. Moses was filled with wonder at the sight of a bush on fire which wasn't consumed by that fire. However, it's easy to wonder at something unusual such as that. Even a fool wonders at the unusual. It takes a wise person to wonder at the usual. This is our problem. We long for visions but seldom watch a sunset.

Most of us find it difficult to recognize the greatness and wonder of things familiar to us, the 'miracles' which are daily with us. The root of worship lies in a sense of these miracles. Awe and wonder can be caused by small things. A grain of sand or a leaf, or a snowflake can suffice.

It's a poor faith that needs miracles to sustain it. Those who are attuned to God do not need to see miracles. They

are conscious of living in a world which is sustained by his power, and every part of which speaks of him. Elizabeth Barrett Browning put it like this:

*Earth crammed with heaven,
and every bush afire with God.
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
the rest of us sit around and pluck blackberries.*

Those who are able to nourish their faith from the daily miracles that surround them are like people sitting at a banquet table. Those whose faith must be nourished by 'wonders' are like people depending on the odd snack here and there.

God told Moses that he was standing on holy ground. What was it that made that particular piece of scrubland holy? It was the presence of God. Here in church we are standing on holy ground, because here we are in the presence of God. Moses was told to take off his shoes. This is why Moslems remove their shoes before entering a mosque. We Christians don't take off our shoes before entering a church. But there is something we ought to put on before entering, namely, a sense of reverence.

Here we experience the presence of God. But let us not forget that God is everywhere. Which means that all places are holy, the whole earth is holy. God can be encountered anywhere. The distinction between the secular and the sacred is ours, not God's.

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SECOND READING: A warning against spiritual cockiness

Towards the end of today's second reading, Paul writes: "Whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care lest he fall." Reflecting on this reading, Fr. Albert Cylwicky writes:

*The movie entitled *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* tells the story of a talented young senator whose political star is on the rise. Joe Tynan is persuaded to champion a cause, which will put him in the spotlight and secure for him a national constituency. As he devotes more time and energy to political issues, he spends less time with his family. The deeper Joe Tynan gets involved with his political associates, the further he gets away from his wife and children. Finally, he commits adultery. His seduction by power, fame and sex is now complete.*

The Seduction of Joe Tynan might well be captioned by St. Paul's warning when he writes: "The things that happened to our fathers serve as an example. They have been written as warnings to us, upon whom the end of the ages has come. For all these reasons, let anyone who thinks he is standing upright watch out lest he fall!"

Paul is warning the Jews of his day who think that they are very special because they are descendants of Moses. This is not so, says Paul. They are only one step away from being struck down by God's destroying angel, unless they keep God's commandments.

Today the same warning is given to us. From our own experience we know that the warning is a much needed one. Any member of Alcoholics Anonymous will tell you that he is only one drink away from becoming a drunk again. Any compulsive eater will confess that he is just one eating binge away from regaining in a week all the weight it took him a year to lose.

It doesn't matter what our weakness is – smoking, gambling, drugs, or pornography – we know from sad experience that we are only one step away from slipping back into our old routine of self-indulgence, and only one occasion away from collapsing into our former habits of sin. Old habits die slowly, if at all, and that is why we must never be complacent about them.

Besides the negative side of Paul's warning, there is also a positive side. Perhaps like Joe Tynan we are only one step away from falling into sin, but we are also just one step away from moving towards the Lord Jesus. Like Moses we are always standing on sacred ground in the presence of God, if only to look for him in the burning bush of our everyday situation.

Like Matthew we may be only one tax collection away from becoming a real follower of Christ. Like Zacchaeus we may have to climb only one more tree to get closer to Jesus. Like the Samaritan woman at the well we may be only one drink of water away from accepting Jesus as our savior.

The Scriptures are full of examples of the opportunities, which we have to repent of the past and to reform our lives. Every temptation is not only an attraction turning us away from Jesus, but also a time of opportunity and challenge to follow him more closely.

On the one hand, as Paul warns, if we think we are standing upright we should watch, because one step in the wrong direction and we may be like Joe Tynan. On the other hand, we are only one step away from the burning bush of the Lord's presence, his forgiveness of our sins, his healing of our ills, and his crowning of our lives with glory.

GOSPEL: Parable of the Second Chance (Lk 13:1-9)

Following is the commentary I have written on this week's Gospel for the *Small Christian Communities*,

which is used by several parishes in Brevard and in other parts of the country. These commentaries are available each week on our parish website.

Today's Gospel makes reference to two disasters which Jesus is asked to comment on. The people asking for Jesus' comment seem to believe that bad things happened to the victims because they were sinners. The absence of bad things in the questioners' lives implies that they are righteous and not in need of repentance.

Jesus quickly sets his questioners straight on this issue: "Bad things didn't happen to the victims in either incident because they were unrighteous or bad people. And the absence of bad things in your lives does not mean that you are not in need of repentance. Indeed you are." Jesus says: "You are all in need of repentance and if you do not repent, you will perish." The unrepentant will suffer a fate worse than the victims of the disaster. Jesus uses the two terrible events as a metaphor for the catastrophic ending that awaits those who refuse to repent. Jesus is saying the big tragedy in life is not being abused or killed accidentally. Rather, true tragedy rests in the hearts of each of us and our proclivity to reject God's call to repentance and a change of heart.

Jesus is saying to his audience and to us: "Don't be preoccupied with why bad things happen to other people. Rather, be concerned about the condition of your own soul." When people are tragically killed, it is indeed awful. But in Jesus' mind, a worse tragedy is a mind and heart closed to God. *No one* can afford to be spiritually complacent.

Then Jesus tells the parable of the *Fig Tree*, sometimes called "*The Parable of the Second Chance*." The owner of the fig tree, noticing that it is not bearing fruit, wants to cut it down. The vinedresser asks that it be given one more chance: "*Sir, leave it for another year.*" The fig tree represents Israel. The Vinedresser represents God. Just as the gardener is patient with the fig tree, so is God patient with sinners. In his youth, Moses killed a man, but God doesn't write him off. God sees immense potential in this former murderer and calls him to carry out a great mission. Church history is full of examples of barren fig trees that, in time, became fruitful, e.g., Paul, Augustine, and Thomas Merton. But the parable also makes it clear that time may run out on the unrepentant. If people refuse chance after chance to turn their lives around, God will not quit on them, but they will, by deliberate choice, shut themselves out of God's Kingdom. This parable calls us to be fruitful trees in God's Vineyard.

Have a blessed week,

