

Fifth Sunday of Easter May 22, 2011 A

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF EXODUS- THE MOST IMPORTANT BOOK IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

As most of you know, I have been teaching a course on the Old Testament. The focus of the next two classes will be the Book of Exodus—the most important book in the Old Testament. You are welcome to attend these next two sessions even if you have not attended the previous sessions and do not wish to attend the succeeding sessions. If you plan to come, please let Teresa know at the front office 254-1595 ext. 3050 or email her at tromano@ascensioncatholicsch.org. Bring a Bible and if you can, read or glance through the first 15 chapters of Exodus that would be helpful preparation.

The second book of the Pentateuch is called Exodus from the Greek word for “*departure*” because its central event revolves around the departure of the Israelites from Egypt. It continues the history of the chosen people from the point where the Book of Genesis leaves off. It recounts the oppression by the Egyptians of the ever-increasing descendants of Jacob and their miraculous deliverance by God through Moses, who led them across the Red Sea to Mount Sinai where they entered into a special covenant with the Lord.

The Book of Exodus is regarded by most, if not all, scholars as *the* most important book of the Old Testament because it tells us about the two most important events in Israel’s history: how God *freed* the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and how he entered into a solemn *covenant* with them at Mount Sinai. In this book, Israel becomes a nation and a people special to God.

Religious epic. As a piece of literature, the Book of Exodus is often regarded as a religious epic filled with intense suspense and drama, especially in the chapters that describe Moses’ confrontations with Pharaoh, the crossing of the Red Sea, and Moses’ encounter with God on Mount Sinai.

Division of Chapters. The forty chapters in the Book of Exodus can be subdivided in different ways. One way is grouping them into three geographical regions where God meets Israel.

Chapters 1-12: Land of Egypt. God works wonders to free the people from slavery.

Chapters 13-18: Wilderness. God guides the people to safety and provides for them in the wilderness.

Chapters 19-40: Mount Sinai. God establishes a community in covenant law and worship.

Timeline. Most scholars believe that the Exodus event took place around 1250 B.C. in an area northeast of present-day Cairo.

Major themes. The two major themes of Exodus are (1) Israel’s liberation from slavery and (2) Sinai covenant. In between these themes, we read about Israel’s experience in the desert.

Suggested Texts to Read

Chapters 1-3: Israel’s oppression in Egypt; Moses’ adoption; Flight into the desert; Moses’ call to mission

Chapter 4:1-17: Moses’ attempt to wiggle his way out of God’s call

Chapter 5: Moses’ and Aaron’s confrontation with Pharaoh (things get worse for the Israelites before they get better)

Chapters 7:14-11:10: The ten plagues

Chapter 12:1-20: Passover ritual (first reading on Holy Thursday)

Chapter 12:29-42: Israelites’ departure from Egypt

Chapters 13:14-14:32: The Red Sea event

Chapters 16-17: Israel in the wilderness

Chapter 19 (key verses 3-8): Israel’s solemn covenant with God

Chapter 20: The Ten Commandments

Chapter 24: Covenant ritual

Chapters 32-33: Golden calf incident (Israel breaks her covenant with God)

Chapter 34:1-9: Renewal of covenant

Chapter 40:34-38: God's special presence with Israel in their dwelling (also called Meeting Tent, Sanctuary)

TRUSTING GOD WITH MY LIFE

The following was written by Fr. Frank McAuliffe, a priest serving the Church in South Africa.

In reading the gospels we notice how remarkably little Jesus actually tells us about prayer. He does indeed give us the Our Father as the model of how to pray, but he does not go into any detail on what happened during the many nights he spent in prayer to his Father. However, a close reading of the gospels makes clear the attitude that dominated Jesus' life—that of loving acceptance of the will of his Father. I would like to suggest that it is by entering into this attitude of Jesus that we can best learn the meaning of Christian prayer. Christ did not just say prayers; his whole life was prayer. For us, as for Christ, prayer is giving God the freedom to direct and control every moment of our lives. It is an entry into the prayer of Jesus himself, a prayer that culminated in his "becoming obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

Letting God Take Control

Our lives are a gift from God, and this gift is measured out to us, moment by moment, in the events and circumstances that make up each day.

Letting God take control of each moment is the key to a prayerful life. This involves the willingness to let go of a very basic instinct—the desire to take charge of my life and arrange my future.

This desire can become almost an obsession. I have set plans and goals for myself, and they must be achieved in my way and in my time. No one, not even God, is allowed to interfere! With such an attitude, two reactions are possible when I come face to face with the disappointments and failures that are an inevitable part of life. Firstly, I become irritated, frustrated and angry. I constantly blame God and others because things have not gone as I had planned. Or, secondly, I sink into a sullen mood of self-pity, brooding why fate is always so cruelly against me—Murphy's Law was made just for me!

If we reflect on these reactions, we see that they describe a life that has largely marginalized God—a life that is securely in my hands. Even though I may say many prayers, there is a radical separation between my prayer and my life. God may be there but he is confined

to the times I'm 'saying my prayers'; his role is to help me live my life in my way. All this suggests a certain lack of faith in God—a refusal to let God into the really significant areas of my life. My ego is firmly in charge, and when this happens there can be little real space for God. For that reason, my life will be anxious, tense and driven; it will not radiate those characteristics which testify to the presence of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness etc. These qualities are evident in a life that is handed over to God, that sees and accepts his will in all of life's circumstances.

This acceptance is not born of stoicism or fatalism, but of a deep faith in God's power and love. God is in control of my life, and in his own mysterious way he will arrange that, in those much quoted words of Julian of Norwich, "All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

When Life Is Difficult

Sometimes accepting God's will is relatively easy—as with the minor inconveniences that come our way each day. But in other situations it can be extremely difficult. One thinks especially of those situations where I find myself a victim of circumstances beyond my control, and which try my patience so much. In such situations, how easy it is, as the English Carmelite, Ruth Burrows, remarks, to turn in on myself in self-pity and form a deep conviction that I am being wronged. If only I wasn't trapped in this boring job; if only this next-door neighbor was living elsewhere; if only people understood and appreciated me more; if only my wife was less fussy, my husband more sensitive, my children more intelligent! The list is endless—always, if, if, if!!

The Christian solution is to face reality as it is, here and now. The truly Christ-like people are not those who spend themselves avoiding life's difficulties, trying to control life to suit their own purpose. They are those who have taken to heart the words of Jesus that we must take up our cross daily if we are to be his disciples. The most genuine cross is not one we choose for ourselves, but one that is fashioned in the trials that come our way each day. It is in courageously accepting these trials that we prove our seriousness in wanting to be followers of Christ.

In Safe Hands

Recognizing God at the heart of the ordinary—is this not what Paul means by his suggestion that we pray ceaselessly? It often happens in the world of faith that the meaning of our present trials is understood only in years to come, just as the disciples did not grasp the meaning of Christ's death until after his resurrection.

I'm sure our life-experience has taught many of us a similar truth—that our lives are lived in foresight but understood in hindsight. It is only through courage and perseverance in times of trial that we slowly come to see that, in the strange ways of God, “all things work together unto good.” And these times of trial teach us a very valuable lesson about prayer—that genuine prayer is not an attempt to make God conform to our plans but is rather a surrender of our plans to the loving design that he has for us.

To be able to bless God in everything that happens to us in life is to have allowed God to pass beyond our prayer routines and formula, and occupy the very centre of our lives.

The following piece is by Jay Cormier.

Sacred Knitting

A group of women meet one or two evenings a week. They light a candle and offer a prayer together, perhaps singing a hymn. Then they begin their sacred work.

The women are part of a ministry that has touched many lives in many churches and parishes. They knit and crochet prayer shawls. The shawls are given to individuals suffering through a time of transition, crisis, illness or need. A wedding, the birth of a child, a broken bone, an illness, the death of a loved one—all are occasions for the “hug” in the shape of a shawl. While stitching, the maker of the shawl holds that person in her thoughts, making the very act of knitting a prayer.

Those who receive the shawls say that they feel loved, cared for and most of all, surrounded by God's love and compassion. They are deeply moved to know that someone has cared enough to pray for them and to make this cozy, warm, comforting gift. The mother of a young girl battling cancer, told the knitters in her parish that her daughter said that when she felt bad, she wrapped herself up tightly in the shawl and it made her feel better. Another woman refused to take her shawl off during her final months of life because it was her “scarf of love.” Many who have known the solace of a prayer shawl in final stages of their illness ask to be buried with the shawl around their shoulders.

But the knitters believe that they receive as much from making the shawls as do those who receive them.

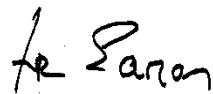
Their simple knitting and gentle prayer become offerings of God's compassion for others—and God is as present to them as they knit as he is to those who will wrap themselves up in the loving warmth of the shawl itself.

[From “Knit Together with Prayer” by the Rev. Susan S. Izard, Spirituality & Health, Nov/Dec 2004. For more on the prayer shawl ministry, visit the website shawlministry.com.]

The simplest work of compassion and charity, done in God's spirit of love, is to do the very work of Christ; the most hidden and unseen acts of kindness will be exalted by Christ as great in the kingdom of his Father. On the night before he died, Jesus asks his disciples to take up “the work that I do”—the work of humble servanthood that places the hurts and pain of others before our own, the work of charity that does not measure the cost, the work of love that transcends limits and conditions.

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Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Le Sarah".