

FIRST READING: Colossians 2:6-15

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Colossians:

Brothers and sisters: As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, walk in him, rooted in him and built upon him and established in the faith as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one captivate you with an empty, seductive philosophy according to the tradition of men, according to the elemental powers of the world and not according to Christ. For in him dwells the whole fullness of the deity bodily, and you share in this fullness in him, who is the head of every principality and power. In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not administered by hand, by stripping off the carnal body, with the circumcision of Christ. You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. And even when you were dead in transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, he brought you to life along with him, having forgiven us all our transgressions; obliterating the bond against us, with its legal claims, which was opposed to us, he also removed it from our midst, nailing it to the cross; despoiling the principalities and the powers, he made a public spectacle of them, leading them away in triumph by it.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 145:1b-2, 8-9, 10-11

The Lord is compassionate toward all his works.

I will extol you, O my God and King, and I will bless your name forever and ever. Every day will I bless you, and I will praise your name forever and ever.

The Lord is compassionate toward all his works.

The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness. The LORD is good to all and compassionate toward all his works.

The Lord is compassionate toward all his works.

Let all your works give you thanks, O LORD, and let your faithful ones bless you. Let them discourse of the glory of your Kingdom and speak of your might.

The Lord is compassionate toward all his works.

Gospel: Luke 6:12-19

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke:

Jesus departed to the mountain to pray, and he spent the night in prayer to God. When day came, he called his disciples to himself, and from them he chose Twelve, whom he also named Apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus Simon who was called a Zealot, and Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor. And he came down with them and stood on a stretch of level ground. A great crowd of his disciples and a large number of the people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and even those who were tormented by unclean spirits were cured. Everyone in the crowd sought to touch him because power came forth from him and healed them all.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 23rd Tuesday of the Year

What does it mean to receive Christ? What is circumcision? How do we strip off our carnal bodies? Religion deals with mystery, things unseen that cannot be proven. When Paul talks about them he uses words that are inadequate. Circumcision is a physical, some may say unnecessary, medical surgical procedure. It is part of the initiation process for males into Judaism. It is their sign of the Covenant between God and God's people. We can forget that Paul was a Jew. He remained faithful to Christ as a Jew. We also forget that the very early Church was a Jewish sect. As the Church began to attract non-Jews, the community had to face what it meant to belong to Christ. Did one have to be Jewish to do that?

Christians, during Paul's life were both Jewish and former pagans. Paul, the apostles and Jewish believers in Jesus had to accept that fact. They had to adapt as the pagans had to renounce their idols. This was radical change for both groups. They were one Church by their faith in Jesus Christ. In those early years, faith in Jesus flowed out of Judaism. Salvation came to humanity in Jesus through the faith of Abraham. Jesus was born a Jew and as a male was circumcised. At first, to become Christian, one had to become Jewish to receive Jesus. Jewish baby boys were circumcised in infancy. Few adult men would want to endure what is a delicate and painful experience.

The Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul reflect the shift from Judaic rituals to our Rites of Christian Initiation. The first Ecumenical Council, which is a gathering, at least symbolically, of the whole Church, of Jerusalem faced this problem. Their decision set Judaism and Christianity on separate courses. The Council decided that pagans did not have to become Jews first. They had to renounce all pagan idols, practices and prayers to allow Christ to receive them and for them to receive Christ. They received Baptism as the outward sign of their conversion. They professed faith in God, Jesus and the resurrection of the dead when Christ returns at the end of the age.

What had been a physical, surgical event that someone endured became something that Christ brought about as a gift. Jesus sacrifice on the cross led to his resurrection. God saved humanity through Jesus' death. God gave humanity the promise of eternal life through Jesus' resurrection. Jesus returned to the Father with a promise. Jesus would remain with his Church always. The Holy Spirit would come to enlighten, teach, lead and guide the Church. Graced by the Spirit, the Church would thrive until Jesus' return. Upon his return, Jesus would fulfill his promise and establish the Kingdom of God. The dead will rise and join with the living to rule and live forever with Jesus.

In Paul's day, the Church believed and expected that Jesus would return very soon, now. Two millennia later, here are we. We still believe that Jesus will return but we don't expect to welcome him soon any more. The end for us seems far away in the future. Paul and the early Church were surprised that they died before the big event. We will be surprised if Jesus returns today. In these subsequent centuries, we have come to see that Jesus' return has other ramifications too. First Jesus returns for each of us when we die before he returns as king at the end of time.

Paul used the jargon of his day to explain the mysteries of faith. We use other jargon today. We don't flay ourselves alive. Even though that's what stripping off carnal flesh from the body is what flaying means. It was a common means of torture and execution of criminals, traitors and Christians at the time. We would say to give up bad habits and stop sinning. We would also say to put into practice the faith of Christ. What Paul means is simple. Faith in Jesus changes us. To be in Jesus, we live anew, forgiven, faithful and with the gift of salvation. We live in Jesus because in dying, Jesus gave us a share in his life. We let go of our former life of sin with the grace of Jesus and the guidance of the Spirit.

Paul also gave some advice to believers. Don't let anyone distract you from Christ. Put in Paul's terms; avoid being captivated by empty and seductive philosophies, traditions and rituals that are human and devoid of God. Paul's audience/congregation was partly pagan in origin and came from a pagan population that celebrated these things. Over the centuries, as the Church grew, this became less and less the Church's experience.

Paul's words were used as a wedge to separate faith from science and philosophy. This was never Paul's intent. Knowledge and experience of the world is not evil; idolatry is. God, after all, has made a cosmos that works. Human beings have a mind that can understand philosophy and science as well as theology and religion. There are but three things that endure, wrote Paul. Faith hope and love; the greatest of these is love. Paul has assumed that we have all received those gifts. We read and heed his words. If they weren't our gifts already, we wouldn't.

The response today has struck me as odd. God has compassion for God's works. Right now, I am working. I am composing a reflection for today. I am typing. This is my work. Do I have compassion for this reflection? No, I have compassion for those who will read it. I want my thoughts to be clear; my writing to aid in their clarity. The psalmist seems to have reduced the relationship of God to God's people, one of father to beloved children, to tasks. True, God's work is creation and salvation. God's work is much more personal. Why does the response not stipulate who and what God's work is. That's up to us as we read the rest of the verses of the Psalm. They speak of the personal relationship between God and God's beloved child.

The gospels show an important insight into Jesus; he prayed. Even though, as God, he prayed to himself, prayer was something Jesus did on a regular basis. We view his praying from our perspective. We pray to accomplish something. We want things from God. We may pray for trivial things like the Sox to win or for us to get all the green lights on the way home. We may pray for those we love; to change their ways, for their health or that we may see them soon.

We also forget that in praying to God, God already knows us, our thoughts, feelings and desires better than we do. God knows all things being infinite, eternal, unconditional and all powerful. We can forget that we are created in God's image and likeness; we do not create God. Our prayers are not for God. We pray because God has graced us with prayer. Our prayers benefit us. Prayer is the way God enters our lives with tender intimacy. God desires closeness to us. In this way Jesus prayed. Prayer is also a means for discernment. We pray to know God's guidance and strength. This was Jesus' reason to pray. He picked the twelve as a result of prayer.

Jesus taught us to pray with the Our Father. The word Jesus used for Father was Abba, the equivalent of daddy or papa. Abba is an intimate name. Jesus has also taught us in this passage to pray for discernment. We can make choices, as he did, with the strength and guidance of God.

Luke used two words to describe them; disciple and apostle. A disciple is one who follows and learns from a teacher. An apostle is one sent out. That's what the word means in Greek. A disciple learns and receives formation until the day they carry on the teacher's mission. In naming the twelve we learn a little about them; nicknames, family relationships, political affiliation and that one became a traitor.

We believe that Jesus is God, all-knowing in identity and mission. Why would God pick God's own traitor? It was part of God's mission. Jesus death was the mission's purpose. There had to be a traitor to do God's will and put God's plan in motion. Judas Iscariot was the means God chose to bring us salvation. I have some compassion for the man. God's mercy is greater than mine and the mercy of the early Church. Like Judas, I am a sinner too. May God be merciful to us all.

There is an image that haunts me from the closing line of today's gospel. Power came forth from him to heal them all. When people touched Jesus, did Jesus feel his power share? Did he feel the power too? When the power left him, did he feel anything reciprocate? Did Jesus feel their gratitude and hope? Did he feel their pain? I wonder if, for Jesus, empathy goes both ways. We know that Jesus was no stranger to sorrow, pain and suffering. Did his compassion help him to know another's inner feelings in a more, intimate and divine manner? Just a thought.

The early Church faced division as it grew. Paul's letter showed Jesus saving grace in the process of transformation, as individuals and as a community. Jesus is the path to unity and the kingdom of God. God has given us life; now and in the life to come, through Jesus. Jesus called the twelve by name, knowing them well accepting them as they were and were about to do. He called Judas, a sinner who betrayed him. This was part of Jesus mission and God's plan to save sinners. Was Judas the first sinner or, like Paul, am I?

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