

Readings for Tuesday the 19th Week of the Year

FIRST READING: Ezekiel 2:8—3:4

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel:

The Lord GOD said to me: As for you, son of man, obey me when I speak to you: be not rebellious like this house of rebellion, but open your mouth and eat what I shall give you. It was then I saw a hand stretched out to me, in which was a written scroll which he unrolled before me. It was covered with writing front and back, and written on it was: Lamentation and wailing and woe! He said to me: Son of man, eat what is before you; eat this scroll, then go, speak to the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth and he gave me the scroll to eat. Son of man, he then said to me, feed your belly and fill your stomach with this scroll I am giving you. I ate it, and it was as sweet as honey in my mouth. He said: Son of man, go now to the house of Israel, and speak my words to them.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 119:14, 24, 72, 103, 111, 131

How sweet to my taste is your promise!

In the way of your decrees I rejoice, as much as in all riches. Yes, your decrees are my delight; they are my counselors.

How sweet to my taste is your promise!

The law of your mouth is to me more precious than thousands of gold and silver pieces. How sweet to my palate are your promises, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

How sweet to my taste is your promise!

Your decrees are my inheritance forever; the joy of my heart they are. I gasp with open mouth, in my yearning for your commands.

How sweet to my taste is your promise!

Gospel: Matthew 18:1-5, 10, 12-14

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew:

The disciples approached Jesus and said, "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?" He called a child over, placed it in their midst, and said, "Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the Kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me. "See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven always look upon the face of my heavenly Father. What is your opinion? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them goes astray, will he not leave the ninety-nine in the hills and go in search of the stray? And if he finds it, amen, I say to you, he rejoices more over it than over the ninety-nine that did not stray. In just the same way, it is not the will of your heavenly Father that one of these little ones be lost."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for Tuesday the 19th Week of the Year

Today's first reading introduces the prophet Ezekiel. He was a prophet of the Exile and the Diaspora. He lived far from Jerusalem and the temple, both of which were destroyed. His prophesies were far more symbolic than the earlier prophets using images that are removed from home, temple and ritual. They seem strange, but God's people now are strangers in a strange land.

God handed Ezekiel a scroll. The scroll could have been papyrus, made of wet and pounded reed stems that were pressed together and flattened and then dried, or animal skin. Paper had not yet been invented. Paper was invented in China three to four hundred years later. The message on the scroll was unpleasant and bitter, lamentation, wailing and woe. This makes sense because, as exiles and in Diaspora, that was the lived experience of God's people. God told Ezekiel to eat the scroll. I can't imagine eating paper let alone fibrous papyrus or leather. Yet the taste was sweet.

Was this a real or symbolic action that God demanded and Ezekiel completed? Did it have a deeper, symbolic meaning instead? God was asking him to internalize God's Word and make it his own. That's the task of anyone who spends time reading the bible. Through God's gift of faith, God's Word takes root in our lives. What we think, feel, say and act comes from our internalization of God's Word. The mission of the prophet is also ours.

What is the opposite of rebellion? God seeks obedience. The tension between obedience and rebellion is a common theme of scripture. People rebelled against Moses and God on their journey through the desert to the Promised Land. The ten northern tribes rebelled against the king in Jerusalem and founded the nation of Israel. The kingdoms of Israel and then Judah rebelled against the kingdoms of the north, Assyria and Babylon. This led to their captivity and exile in the time of Ezekiel. We rebel each time we sin.

The Our Father addresses this tension in its words, "Thy kingdom come; thy will be done," and forgive us ... as we forgive." God still seeks our obedience. God seeks to save all God's people now just as he sought salvation for the people entrusted to the ministry of Ezekiel. The prayer of Jesus is Jesus' own words to us. They can be sweet as honey for they promise God's mercy.

The Psalm, today, speaks of and inheritance. Our inheritance is God's decree and God's law. God's decree is Jesus, God's Word. God's law is love. Jesus is God; God is love. God's love is eternal and unconditional. God's Word is for all humanity. This is what makes the Word the Good News. In this sense, God's Word is sweeter than honey. The word gives hope to those who seem lost in lamentation, weeping and woe.

Anyone who has spent any time around children knows that they are both a delight and a challenge. I am old enough to have been told many times, "Children are meant to be seen and not heard." I may not have listened to it very often. Children and women in the time of Jesus had little status in society; that is they had no voice. Women were, and are, absolutely necessary for the proper functioning of society. Children were, and are, the focus of society's attention and care.

When Jesus calls over a child, what does he mean? He does not refer to their innocence. Kids can be a handful and, like us adults, will seek any opportunity to get away with mischief. Children can be self centered too. Humility is not always a child-like quality. What was Jesus trying to say? Children depend on their family's care from infancy until they become independent. Eventually they may begin their own families and begin to care for their own children. What Jesus tells us is simple. Each believer, before God, depends completely upon God from birth to death. Our very lives come from God as a gift. Jesus wants us to depend on God for all things and to be interdependent with each other.

Who can be the greatest and how? What made Jesus great? Was it because Jesus is God and God is great or is it something more subtle? Jesus did God's will. God became a human being in all but sin, preached and served God's people and sacrificed his life on the cross to save us. Jesus knew who he was and his mission. That is Jesus' humility. Being humble is to know who we are and what our mission is. We know our strengths and weaknesses. We know our good and bad deeds. We can accept our limitations and can surprise others and ourselves as we exceed them. Humility is an honest appraisal of our selves. Most of the time we can think it's the false humility of humiliation. We can love ourselves because God has first loved each of us thus making each of us God's dwelling place.

Another way to know that innocence is not the quality in us that Jesus seeks comes at the end with the parable of the lost sheep. Each of us can wander from God and get lost in sin. Jesus seeks to seek out the sinner and reunite each sinner to God and to God's people. As a son or daughter of God, each of us is God's beloved. God's love is so vast that God can have as a beloved every human being alive now, all those who have ever lived and all those yet to be born. I maintain that there are perks to being eternal and unconditional love.

The Jewish people of the Diaspora lamented what they lost; a king, a city, a temple and a land God promised. The sweetness of God's word came from the fact that they did not lose God. God went into Diaspora with them. God is king. God is home. God lives in, with and through God's people. We, as God's children depend upon God for life, love, faith, forgiveness and living with one another. The sweetness of God we can know even in woe.

I hope, as you read you have health and safety. May God help us keep each other safe.

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August 11, 2020