

Reading and Reflection for Tuesday the 11th Week of the Year

FIRST READING: 1 Kings 21:17-29

A reading from the first Book of Kings:

After the death of Naboth the LORD said to Elijah the Tishbite: "Start down to meet Ahab, king of Israel, who rules in Samaria. He will be in the vineyard of Naboth, of which he has come to take possession. This is what you shall tell him, 'The LORD says: After murdering, do you also take possession? For this, the LORD says: In the place where the dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, the dogs shall lick up your blood, too.'" Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me out, my enemy?" "Yes," he answered. "Because you have given yourself up to doing evil in the LORD's sight, I am bringing evil upon you: I will destroy you and will cut off every male in Ahab's line, whether slave or freeman, in Israel. I will make your house like that of Jeroboam, son of Nebat, and like that of Baasha, son of Ahijah, because of how you have provoked me by leading Israel into sin." (Against Jezebel, too, the LORD declared, "The dogs shall devour Jezebel in the district of Jezreel.") "When one of Ahab's line dies in the city, dogs will devour him; when one of them dies in the field, the birds of the sky will devour him." Indeed, no one gave himself up to the doing of evil in the sight of the LORD as did Ahab, urged on by his wife Jezebel. He became completely abominable by following idols, just as the Amorites had done, whom the LORD drove out before the children of Israel. When Ahab heard these words, he tore his garments and put on sackcloth over his bare flesh. He fasted, slept in the sackcloth, and went about subdued. Then the LORD said to Elijah the Tishbite, "Have you seen that Ahab has humbled himself before me? Since he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the evil in his time. I will bring the evil upon his house during the reign of his son."

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 51:3-4, 5-6ab, 11 and 16

Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness; in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense. Thoroughly wash me from my guilt and of my sin cleanse me.

Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

For I acknowledge my offense, and my sin is before me always: "Against you only have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight."

Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

Turn away your face from my sins, and blot out all my guilt. Free me from blood guilt, O God, my saving God; then my tongue shall revel in your justice.

Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

Gospel: Matthew 5:43-48

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew:

Jesus said to his disciples: "You have heard that it was said, *You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy*. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same? So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for Tuesday the 11th Week of the Year

Does God punish sin? Will God kill the entire family of a sinner? Will God go so far as killing all a sinner's friends and those who serve the sinner? Since all of us sin and are therefore sinners, think about the numbers. Many people serve us down to the kid who serves us our Big Mac value meal. Is God that nasty? If so, why would any one believe, trust or love a God like that?

Patrick arrived in Ireland with the Gospel of Salvation and proclaimed God's unconditional love to the Irish. Now the Irish, at that time, believed in gods who sought, from time to time, human sacrifice. Patrick preached the story of the God who died for people. I can just see the folks scratch their heads and ask, "Why didn't we think about this before?" Only in Ireland was there no persecution of those who preached and converted to Jesus the Christ. Patrick was about forty years old when he arrived as a missionary. He died about the age of eighty. Within those forty years as he preached the Gospel, most of the Irish converted from paganism to Christianity. When Patrick died and became St. Patrick, he had witnessed his mission's success.

I tell this story as counterpoint to the message of most of this first reading. Ahab repented. God relented? No, God did not. He would fulfill the threat upon Ahab's son. Ahab got off and God's punishment fell to one who did not kill Naboth. I still ask the question above. Why would any one believe, trust or love a God like that?

If this encounter between Ahab and Elijah was an historical event, history is written after the event. The bible relates history, but is not a history book. It is the story of people who believe in God. This people actively seek God in their lives. They observed an event. Ahab's son was deposed, violently, in a revolt. Many people were killed. A faithful people asked how God was part of the event. They asked the human question, "Why did this happen?" The answer to that question is not possible. How can anyone know the mind of God? Sometimes we don't even know our own minds fully when we do bad things. The answers we give to that question, "Why," can be bizarre and outlandish. We try to give meaning to what essentially is meaningless. Stuff happens.

In our times, now, as we face an invisible, infectious and potentially deadly COVID 19 pandemic, we want to ask God the same question, "Why." We may also ask, in the face of the civil unrest that was caused by a policeman killing George Floyd and while fellow police said nothing of the knee on George's neck for eight minutes, "Why." The answers to the question, "Why," if left to Human nature would probably be as bizarre and outlandish as God killing off Ahab's son for Ahab's sin. I ask other questions here. How can we live with one another in a COVID 19 infested world? What is our response to injustice? Would the policemen do that to me or you? Mr. Floyd could not count on what we expect as a simple human right, to live. What is the response to these events, in faith, by people who believe?

I also ask another question. What was God's response to the God's people's sin? God sent Jesus. God so loved the world that he sent his Son Jesus, so that all who believe may have eternal life. The message that St. Patrick brought to the pagan Celtic Irish Druids is God's same message to us. God died for our sins. Jesus' death on the cross redeemed us from God's rightful punishment. Jesus won for us the promise of eternal life. We will always fall short of perfection. We are human and flawed. We can do bad things. As opposed to God who is love and who loves all people with unconditional love, we can hate. We can hate sin and sinner. We can invoke God's wrath upon those who hurt us. The gospel, the good news, tells us something else. The measure with which you measure will be measured back to you. You shall love enemies and pray for your persecutors. For give us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. How does one who believes give witness in a fallen world? Jesus' message is clear. Live the gospel as best we can.

When the world brings pain, when bad things happen and when people sin, we do our best to love as Jesus loves us. We forgive as God forgives. It is important to remember what Jesus' command is, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with your entire mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: You must love your neighbor as yourself." I always want to point out that the command is to love, not like. To treat others with respect and forgiveness is part of what the choice to love them means. It is not easy and sometimes we will fail. Fortunately God's response is to our Faith in God and in Jesus, whom God sent and not our failure. God will forgive our failure and sins. All we need do is ask God. God still loves those who hurt us as much as God loves each of us. There is only one human race created in God's image and likeness. It is possible to see God reflected in every person we meet, even in our worst enemy, those we fear and those we dislike.

On our own, to follow Jesus' commandment consistently, is unlikely. God gives us what we need to do so; with his grace. God's grace can be many things for God gives us many gifts. We have the gift of life. We live and are unique, individual persons. We have faith in God and in Jesus, whom God sent. We have our intelligence, talent, family and friends. We have God's love and forgiveness. God has given us the promise of eternal life. God never leaves us. All we need do is remember. Calling this to mind can separate us from those who do not yet believe, by God's grace. It is our mindfulness of God's mission through which God guides our actions. When

we cannot or will not remember, the Spirit will remember for us. How many times a day do we find ourselves thinking of God for no reason?

Whenever we bring our thoughts and feelings to God we pray. Sometimes our thoughts and feelings may be sad, angry, resentful, joyous, hopeful or grateful. God knows us better than we do ourselves. We may not want God to know that our anger or resentment is directed toward God. We may fear, like Ahab, God's wrath and punishment. God already knows what we feel and his love is unconditional. As God turns his heart to each of us, God also turns our hearts to him.

I hope this day finds you well and hopeful. May social distancing not become isolation. May you be safe as you keep others safe as well.

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