

Readings for Tuesday of the Twenty First Week of the Year

FIRST READING: 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3a, 14-17

A reading from the second Letter of Saint Paul to the Thessalonians:

We ask you, brothers and sisters, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling with him, not to be shaken out of your minds suddenly, or to be alarmed either by a "spirit," or by an oral statement, or by a letter allegedly from us to the effect that the day of the Lord is at hand. Let no one deceive you in any way. To this end he has also called you through our Gospel to possess the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught, either by an oral statement or by a letter of ours. May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us everlasting encouragement and good hope through his grace, encourage your hearts and strengthen them in every good deed and word.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 96:10, 11-12, 13

The Lord comes to judge the earth.

Say among the nations: The LORD is king. He has made the world firm, not to be moved; he governs the peoples with equity.

The Lord comes to judge the earth.

Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice; let the sea and what fills it resound; let the plains be joyful and all that is in them! Then shall all the trees of the forest exult.

The Lord comes to judge the earth.

Before the LORD, for he comes; for he comes to rule the earth. He shall rule the world with justice and the peoples with his constancy.

The Lord comes to judge the earth.

Gospel: Matthew 23:23-26

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew:

Jesus said: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You pay tithes of mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier things of the law: judgment and mercy and fidelity. But these you should have done, without neglecting the others. Blind guides, who strain out the gnat and swallow the camel! "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You cleanse the outside of cup and dish, but inside they are full of plunder and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, cleanse first the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may be clean."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for Tuesday of the Twenty First Week of the Year

We have, as of Monday, left the world of the Old Testament and have begun with readings of the New. The Thessalonians are from Thessaloniki in northern Greece. Today it is the capital of the region of Macedonia and the second largest city in Greece. Macedonia is a region of northern Greece as opposed to the country of North Macedonia which was part of the former Yugoslavia. The city of Thessaloniki was founded in 315 BC by Cassander of Macedon. Its roots are deep and ancient.

Paul wanted to encourage the community and trust their Christian formation. Presumably Paul was partly responsible for it. When Paul speaks of the coming Jesus he refers to Jesus' second coming, for which we still wait. We don't expect Jesus to return any time soon, but they did. The date for this letter was between 51 and 81 of the Common Era. By the 80s, it was becoming clear that Jesus' second coming would be later than sooner. It's easier to be good for a short time with Jesus' impending arrival than for the long-haul. Paul had to adapt to Jesus' delay as well. Paul's encouraging words represent his transition to the "new normal" of his day.

Do not be disturbed or alarmed by what you hear is indeed good advice. It was then and is now. When he told them to stand firm in what they learned and know to be true is also good advice. Jesus will return in his and God's own time. Trust God and trust Paul. God's Word is true. Paul spoke God's Word to the believers. This is the content of today's reading. When I read it, I saw a clear parallel to our times, now. I never listen to the spin and hype of political ads during the election season. This pandemic is not over and will not be over until there is an effective treatment and a viable vaccine for COVID 19. Politicians, corporate executives and bishops have no power to declare the pandemic over. It may be our reality for many months or years. To live differently and taking necessary social precautions is becoming a burden. Paul speaks directly to us with his words of encouragement.

All around us we hear of disturbing violence and provocative statements in the news. Some of us suffer from cabin fever. Some of us can become trapped in conspiracy theories. Perhaps all of us need to heed and take heart in Paul's advice to trust our formation and God's Word. Paul has addressed not individuals but the community of believers, the Church. As members of the Church today, we are all in this together as brothers and sisters united with Jesus our brother. We do not face the pain of pandemic and prejudice alone; we are together in Christ. As Catholics we believe in the Communion of Saints. This means that all those who were baptized into Christ and have died still live. Through baptism, we share eternal life too, or at least its promise. We all share the life of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. The witness of the Thessalonians can be the basis of our witness. They become part of the grace God gives us.

There was an old bumper sticker I remember. Jesus will return and is he angry. I always rejected that notion. Usually the person who applied the sticker did so as a statement against the actions of other people. We see the bad actions of others before we can recognize the bad we do. Whenever Paul spoke of sinners he added the line of whom I am first and foremost. We want to see God punish all the other bad people. None of us would want God to damn us to eternal torment. All of us seek God's forgiveness and mercy. God's love is eternal and unconditional. God's mercy and compassion come from the fact that God is love. For what do we hope from the Father who sent the Son to suffer die upon the cross to save each of us? All

sinners are beloved sons or daughters of God. I include the line, as did Paul, of whom I am first and foremost. God's justice is not punitive but redemptive. God does not seek the death of the sinner. God seeks the sinner's salvation.

When I was a deacon in 1978-1979, my parish was founding its first parish pastoral council. Some of the folks in formation had a hard time being advisors. They wanted to be in charge. Pastors were still in charge and could ignore advice even if it was solid and good. The few people who wanted control used this gospel to "call out" the inequities of parish polity. My comments above had their germination in that experience forty two years ago.

I pointed out the message and challenge of scripture is not meant for those others but for you and me who hear the message. Who were the scribes and Pharisees? They weren't the clergy. Scribes were people who could read and write. Their job was to draw up people's documents, translate between Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Aramaic. Some would, with a complicated system of checks and proof reading, write by hand copies of the bible. The Pharisees were members of a religious movement dedicated to bring the Jewish Faith and Mosaic Law into practice in people's lives. They were a branch of Judaism at that time and one of the two surviving branches today. The other is Christianity. Yes, we clergy have to heed the message of scripture to repent and live anew the life of Jesus. We are the first of sinners, but everyone sins too. Jesus message is for you and me to hear, make our own and then live. Each of us is responsible to God for the things we do. Each of us is responsible to seek God for mercy. God gives us what we need to do so.

God's greatest miracle is to transform the human heart. That transformation does not remain hidden and merely personal. In order to love God we first love ourselves and then others. We can love ourselves and others because God first loves us. We can discover the face of God in ourselves and others. Recognizing God's presence is the first step in living out of a transformed heart. This is how we can continue to cope with our "new normal." We show our love of God, self and others as we wash our hands often, keep six feet distance from others and wear a mask in public, work and school. Our actions can be God's way to keep us all safe.

May you remain well.

James D. Beath
August 25, 2020