

A reading from the second Book of Maccabees:

Eleazar, one of the foremost scribes, a man of advanced age and noble appearance, was being forced to open his mouth to eat pork. But preferring a glorious death to a life of defilement, he spat out the meat, and went forward of his own accord to the instrument of torture, as people ought to do who have the courage to reject the food which it is unlawful to taste even for love of life. Those in charge of that unlawful ritual meal took the man aside privately, because of their long acquaintance with him, and urged him to bring meat of his own providing, such as he could legitimately eat, and to pretend to be eating some of the meat of the sacrifice prescribed by the king; in this way he would escape the death penalty, and be treated kindly because of their old friendship with him. But Eleazar made up his mind in a noble manner, worthy of his years, the dignity of his advanced age, the merited distinction of his gray hair, and of the admirable life he had lived from childhood; and so he declared that above all he would be loyal to the holy laws given by God. He told them to send him at once to the abode of the dead, explaining: "At our age it would be unbecoming to make such a pretense; many young people would think the ninety-year-old Eleazar had gone over to an alien religion. Should I thus pretend for the sake of a brief moment of life, they would be led astray by me, while I would bring shame and dishonor on my old age. Even if, for the time being, I avoid the punishment of men, I shall never, whether alive or dead, escape the hands of the Almighty. Therefore, by manfully giving up my life now, I will prove myself worthy of my old age, and I will leave to the young a noble example of how to die willingly and generously for the revered and holy laws." Eleazar spoke thus, and went immediately to the instrument of torture. Those who shortly before had been kindly disposed, now became hostile toward him because what he had said seemed to them utter madness. When he was about to die under the blows, he groaned and said: "The Lord in his holy knowledge knows full well that, although I could have escaped death, I am not only enduring terrible pain in my body from this scourging, but also suffering it with joy in my soul because of my devotion to him." This is how he died, leaving in his death a model of courage and an unforgettable example of virtue not only for the young but for the whole nation.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 3:2-3, 4-5, 6-7

The Lord upholds me.

O LORD, how many are my adversaries! Many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, "There is no salvation for him in God."

The Lord upholds me.

But you, O LORD, are my shield; my glory, you lift up my head! When I call out to the LORD, he answers me from his holy mountain.

The Lord upholds me.

When I lie down in sleep, I wake again, for the LORD sustains me. I fear not the myriads of people arrayed against me on every side.

The Lord upholds me.

Gospel:

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke:

At that time Jesus came to Jericho and intended to pass through the town. Now a man there named Zacchaeus, who was a chief tax collector and also a wealthy man, was seeking to see who Jesus was; but he could not see him because of the crowd, for he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. When he reached the place, Jesus looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house." And he came down quickly and received him with joy. When they saw this, they began to grumble, saying, "He has gone to stay at the house of a sinner." But Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a descendant of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 33rd Tuesday of the Year

Today's first reading's length, violence, religious fanaticism and human cruelty are obscene. This reads like an instruction book for religious zealotry and political rebellion. Who could not hate those who caused this poor, old man's torture and messy, painful death? Was this incident used as a means to justify the killing of those who perpetrated this situation by the rebels? It seems to have been propaganda to inspire future resistance and rebellion.

I remember when I was a kid; I decided that I wasn't very fond of pork chops. I have never been fond of pork fat, with but one exception; bacon. I remember quoting this passage to my parents. Fortunately, my parents had a less strict adherence to it than the ruling Ptolemaic Greek pagan rulers of Judea. My mother was born in early 1930 after the Great Depression had begun. My grand mother made her eat all the pork chops, fat and all. as not to waste any food. My mother did not like pork fat either as a result. She merely advised me to cut the fat off the pork chop. That helped.

I also ask, where is God in this story; where's the faith? Old Eleazar seems to hold fast to tradition as his means to salvation like a shaheen, a Muslim martyr. A glorious death was what he wanted to have. He was a witness to upholding a tradition, a law and believed his righteousness to be the means of his salvation. From our Christian perspective, not only is this a load of nonsense (read something else); it is devoid of God's saving, forgiving and compassionate grace! But, you may say didn't God give him the strength to die? I have to ask a question in reply. Why did a God of infinite, eternal and unconditional love, mercy and compassion desire this man to die? Did he really?

We revere this passage from our perspective of our early Christian martyrs. This man was their pattern, model and forerunner. I still have to ask, did God seek their deaths? Does God desire the deaths of people as a result of human hubris, arrogance and cruelty? Do religious bigots do God's will or act in contrariness to God and God's love? I wish I had a clear answer. What passages like these stir in me is outrage, anger and a desire for the guilty to experience God's wrath and punishment.

Is that what God wants from me; or for that matter, any of us? If so why did Jesus teach us his prayer, the Our Father? We pray, each time we recite it, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." What did Jesus mean with those words? Do we heed them or hedge them? Why did Jesus then tell us, "When some one slaps you on one cheek, offer the other as well?" Justice for Jesus is never revenge. The justice of God is always the forgiveness of sinners. God never turns a sinner away. If he were to turn them away, that would mean that Jesus' cross was a lie and not the means of our salvation.

If I don't read this passage with in the context of God's love, Maccabees is merely the noise of a gong crashing.

Horrible things continue to happen. People still remain thoughtless, heartless and cruel. The pandemic picks up speed again. Politics is still polarized and few see it as the art of the possible any more. People still can hate whole groups of people different from themselves. We speak of many races within the one, human race that God created. All of us, made in God's image and likeness are more closely related, genetically, than the endangered cheetahs. The entire human race is God's children and therefore brothers and sisters with each other. As God's children we are all God's beloved ones. We are also all sinners who need God's merciful forgiveness when we sin. We have our limits, as people, who can rely on the unlimited God for what we lack. It takes an effort to seek God in all we meet. God will give us what we need to seek what we need by God's amazing grace.

Today, the horrors in Maccabees pale in comparison to the story of Zacchaeus. This man, as a tax collector, took people's money and gave it to the Roman occupiers. He was what the Romans called a Publican. The gospel told us that he was a wealthy man. The publicans got paid with a percentage of the taxes they collected. This can sound lucrative, but there was a dark side to this. The Romans had quotas for their agents to collect. If the publican did not collect enough to meet the tax quota, they had to make up for the loss of revenue from their own savings account and investments. Many publicans wound up in poverty or jail if they weren't ruthless and cutthroat enough.

Zacchaeus was one of the fortunate publicans. He must have been extremely good at his job to have amassed so much wealth. He seemed to have an abundance of enthusiasm too. He was excited to meet Jesus, persistent as he faced the crowd's opposition and generous in his reparations. Because of his abundant gifts, Jesus acknowledged his faithfulness to God and saved him. As a descendant of Abraham Zacchaeus gave witness to his salvation and faith with a four fold act of repentance. How has Jesus saved us when we've been lost? Jesus has transformed us. How do we live it?

We live in a world as potentially violent and cruel as the world of Eleazar and Zacchaeus. We, like they, can know God's presence and actively seek God when we need it, as they did. As Jesus transformed Zacchaeus through faith, he transforms us too. The way we live is our witness to the gift of Jesus presence within us.

May the love of God transform and sustain us in faith in all we do and say.

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