

Reading for Tuesday the 27th Week of the Year

FIRST READING: Galatians 1:13-24

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

Brothers and sisters: You heard of my former way of life in Judaism, how I persecuted the Church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it, and progressed in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my race, since I was even more a zealot for my ancestral traditions. But when he, who from my mother's womb had set me apart and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him to the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were Apostles before me; rather, I went into Arabia and then returned to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to confer with Cephas and remained with him for fifteen days. But I did not see any other of the Apostles, only James the brother of the Lord. (As to what I am writing to you, behold, before God, I am not lying.) Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was unknown personally to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only kept hearing that "the one who once was persecuting us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." So they glorified God because of me.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 139:1b-3, 13-14ab, 14c-15

Guide me, Lord, along the everlasting way.

O LORD, you have probed me and you know me; you know when I sit and when I stand; you understand my thoughts from afar. My journeys and my rest you scrutinize, with all my ways you are familiar.

Guide me, Lord, along the everlasting way.

Truly you have formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother's womb. I give you thanks that I am fearfully, wonderfully made; wonderful are your works.

Guide me, Lord, along the everlasting way.

My soul also you knew full well; nor was my frame unknown to you When I was made in secret, when I was fashioned in the depths of the earth.

Guide me, Lord, along the everlasting way.

Gospel: Luke 10:38-42

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke:

Jesus entered a village where a woman whose name was Martha welcomed him. She had a sister named Mary who sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak. Martha, burdened with much serving, came to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving? Tell her to help me." The Lord said to her in reply, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for Tuesday the 27th Week of the Year

Monday morning we moved from the story of Job to Paul's letter to the Galatians. Galatia was a province of the Roman Empire located in what is now central Turkey. The people were Gauls, a Celtic tribe related to Scotts, Irish and Welsh. The original Celtic tribes came from the Caucus Mountains. Most migrated to the west but some migrated to the east. 3,000 year old mummies found in the desert of the Tarim Basin in present-day Xinjiang, China are genetically Celtic. The migration of people was not just a contemporary phenomenon.

With that in mind, I always envision Paul trying to preach to the Irish or the Scotts.

This is one of the most powerful of passages in Paul's letters. Most of us know the story of Paul's conversion in the Acts of the Apostles. This passage tells the story in his own words. Nowhere do we see the bright flash of light. Nowhere do we hear the thunderous, disembodied voice. Paul says nothing of being blinded. Yet, Paul's words reveal his journey to faith. This was, in Paul's eyes, a journey that began from his mother's womb. He was set apart and called by God's grace before he was born. This is the Old Testament's definition of holiness.

Paul saw his persecution of the believers in Jesus to have been part of God's plan both for himself and for the Church of Jesus. Paul, who acted as a bounty-hunter and hit-man for the Jewish authorities, has become an apostle for Jesus and the Church's greatest preacher. Paul has interpreted his conversion as part of God's saving plan. His conversion took time to take root. It, according to Paul's own telling, happened over a period of years not in an instant. I find this telling of his conversion more closely related to mine. I have always found the movement of the Holy Spirit to be subtle not filled with special effects.

Some of the believers in Jesus may have rejoiced, but some may have been a bit more skeptical. When Paul traveled to Jerusalem to meet the apostles, he met with just two, Simon Peter (Cephas is the Aramaic for the Greek petros and the English for rock) and James. This may have happened because they may have feared that Paul was planted to betray them all to the authorities. There may have been a tendency for this to happen on a regular basis. Our modern RCIA, the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, has a built-in nearly year long process. Today it is a period of discernment and formation for the candidate. This period is ancient; it goes back to the earliest days of the Church. The time between conversion to baptism was even longer in the early Church. It served a dual fold purpose. The individual had to be sure of their faith and the community had to protect itself from betrayal to the authorities.

Paul became the Apostle to the Gentiles by default. The established Jewish-Christian Church feared that Paul's conversion was really a deep cover trick. This made him the ideal candidate for missionary work. He went to people who never knew his origins. The apostles may have praised God in this way for Paul's conversion to Jesus. "Thanks be to God for Paul and may God keep Paul far away from us!" There was kinship, too, in Paul's conversion and the conversion of the Gentiles. They knew the power of Jesus call as well.

Paul has told the Galatians, and us, that he is a sinner. He began with a confession of faith that included a confession of sin. Paul left his former life of faith to embrace new life in Christ. His journey of faith paralleled the journeys that the Gentiles took. They may have been sinners embracing the good news and so was Paul. What he preached to them was a real as their own lives. I see this as a most important lesson and witness to us. We are the people we are today by the grace of God. God has led us to this moment through all the events, people and actions we have experienced in life. Good, bad and indifferent, we are all made holy through the eternal and unconditional love of God. We are all making the same journey with Jesus. We travel from womb to now and from now to death and from death to everlasting life in Christ. We have been set apart, made holy from the moment of our being. Our origin and destiny is through, with and in Jesus, like Paul.

How can we know this holiness? Few of us ever feel holy because we know our faults and where all our skeletons are buried. We know our own sins, intimately, as no one else can. No one knows us better than God. Psalm 139 tells it well. "You know when I sit and when I stand; you knit me in my mother's womb." What can our response be to this powerful manifestation of love? We can reject it and say, "I'm no good." It is true that I am a sinner who needs God to save me. God's love is eternal and unconditional. This enables each of us to say as well, "I am fearfully, wonderfully made; wonderful are your works." Each of us is one of those works. Each of us is made in God's image and likeness and shares God's presence. Holiness is found in God's presence.

I have sympathy for both Martha and Mary in this story from the gospel of Luke. Martha offered Jesus hospitality by her gracious invitation to dinner. Mary offered hospitality as she listened to Jesus and sat at his feet. There's always an image of subordination in this. Our cultural perspective gives the image a nuance. We sit in chairs. If someone sat at my feet, they would have to sit on the floor. They would be beneath my feet or beneath me. In Jesus day, they would have reclined to eat. I've had dinner in a real Japanese tea room as well as at the American facsimiles. Years ago I went to one in Uptown, it's now long gone. My classmate and I were pretty big guys. We opted to dine in the tea room. The host guided us to our table and instructed us to sit on the floor with our legs crossed under the table. We didn't fit. We had dinner seated in a booth. The other tea room was in one of the big chains. When escorted to our table, there was a pit under the table to put our legs. Both Jesus and Mary would have sat next to each other. Host and guest were on the same level; the floor.

Martha's request for help with the work was heart felt. She was missing out. She prepared the meal. Her invitation required commitment to the details. Her hospitality was the real work. She got a bad name for this. Listen to Jesus' response. There is no judgment in it. He told her to "roll with the flow." Both their acts of hospitality were necessary to make Jesus feel "at home." Food and company are both needed to share a meal. Both offered hospitality to Jesus, in their own way. One cooked the meal and the other was company. Perhaps Martha merely forgot this and Jesus helped her to remember. She was important too.

What can we take from this story? Jesus told Martha to see the whole picture. Martha needed to accept her role in hospitality. Her comparison between her and her sister's actions caused her anxiety. What can help us to see a broader picture? How can we turn to Jesus? Do we know our importance to Jesus? We can't invite Jesus for lunch but we can invite Jesus into our lives through prayer. Martha turned to Jesus in her frustration and envy; she prayed. Whenever we turn to Jesus in any way, we pray. Jesus will answer us as he answered Martha.

There are many sources of worry and anxiety in our lives. Paul has showed us that God can work even through our sins. We can remember that our life's journey begins, continues and ends in God's presence. Martha's interaction with Jesus joined her more closely to him. We can interact with him too. Jesus can guide us through this life when we do so. The prayer of the psalmist can become yours and mine. "Thank you for I am fearfully, wonderfully made."

God will keep us in the crook of his arm as we strive to keep others and ourselves safe and healthy. Let us offer in prayer all those infected with COVID 19; may they be healed in Christ.

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