

Readings for Thursday the First Week of the Year

FIRST READING: Hebrews 3:7-14

A reading from the Letter to the Hebrews:

The Holy Spirit says: *Oh, that today you would hear his voice, "Harden not your hearts as at the rebellion in the day of testing in the desert, where your ancestors tested and tried me and saw my works for forty years. Because of this I was provoked with that generation and I said, 'They have always been of erring heart, and they do not know my ways.' As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter into my rest.'" Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil and unfaithful heart, so as to forsake the living God. Encourage yourselves daily while it is still "today," so that none of you may grow hardened by the deceit of sin. We have become partners of Christ if only we hold the beginning of the reality firm until the end.*

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 95:6-7c, 8-9, 10-11

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Come, let us bow down in worship; let us kneel before the LORD who made us. For he is our God, and we are the people he shepherds, the flock he guides.

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts

Oh, that today you would hear his voice: "Harden not your hearts as at Meribah, as in the day of Massah in the desert, Where your fathers tempted me; they tested me though they had seen my works."

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Forty years I was wearied of that generation; I said: "This people's heart goes astray, they do not know my ways." Therefore I swore in my anger: "They shall never enter my rest."

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Gospel: Mark 1:40-45

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark:

A leper came to him and kneeling down begged him and said, "If you wish, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand, touched the leper, and said to him, "I do will it. Be made clean." The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean. Then, warning him sternly, he dismissed him at once. Then he said to him, "See that you tell no one anything, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them." The man went away and began to publicize the whole matter. He spread the report abroad so that it was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly. He remained outside in deserted places, and people kept coming to him from everywhere.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for Thursday the First Week of the Year

Context is always key to understand the scriptures. Today's readings are no exception. Hebrews, this morning, began quoting Psalm 95 which refers to events that are recorded in the books of Exodus and Numbers. The Israelite people had been traversing through the desert for some time and were hungry, thirsty, hot and tired. They grumbled against Moses' leadership and questioned his authority. Since Moses, as leader, was chosen by God for his role, the twelve tribes grumbled against and challenged God too. In Hebrew, the location names have significance for this event. Massah means testing and Meribah means quarreling. The accounts of the event differ in the story's two accounts. The conflict in Numbers is the stronger of the two after which God told the people that they will wander in the desert until that present generation, including Moses, will die. God gave water to the people from a rock as a result of the people's grumbling and Moses' prayers. The story told of a blessing and seeming curse. This sort of tension is common in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The message to the Hebrew Christian Community has come out of the history and tradition they all shared. Before I start my reflection on this, let me paraphrase St. Augustine. Even though every thing is a grace, all is a gift and everything we do depends upon the providence of God, we work as if it all depends upon us. There is a tension between what we believe and what we in experience life. We are not always keen to notice God's hand as God works within our lives. Having laid this as a basic principle we can make sense out of this passage.

The letter both admonishes and encourages people to remain faithful and live rightly. Is it possible for one who has received and accepted God's gift of faith to have an evil and unfaithful heart? All of us have mixed motives. All of us have doubts from time to time. All of us sin. We are human and therefore prone to the conflicts, weaknesses and failings we have. Does this mean that we are responsible for our own salvation? No, salvation is a gift from God that Jesus won for us by his death on the cross.

Forgiveness of sin comes out of God's eternal, infinite and unconditional love. God's compassion and mercy have no bounds. Jesus, who has two natures, human and divine, was a human being like us in all but sin. We are not God, but as God's beloved children and Jesus beloved sibling, we have a share in God's life. This does not give us license to do what we want. We have the responsibility to witness to our faith as we live life. God gives us the grace and vision to do what's good and right. With God's gifts, we can avoid sin and do God's will. Since we are human, God forgives us when we fail, and fail we will. We know this because we believe in God and in the one God sent, Jesus. We choose, therefore, to follow Jesus' path to God's Kingdom.

Even though Hebrews, today, does not mention what Jesus has won for us, other passages from the letter do. We can look at the meaning of the location names from the quote from Psalm 95; Massah – testing and Meribah – quarreling. This past year has been a period of testing. It has tested our patience and our relationships. COVID 19 is a global pandemic infecting millions. As a result, it continues to spread and many have sickened, died and have remained affected by it. Our politics can be a source of conflict both in society and families. It is not just a quiet conflict either; it has resulted in violence and death. We still do not see that God has made only one, human race in God's image and likeness. We make ethnicity the gauge of a person's worth. Each human being is a beloved son or daughter of God and a brother and sister of Jesus. We are

all, of us humans, brothers and sisters of one another. We can see God reflected in each other whether we like each other or not. Jesus command is to love not necessarily like one another. Perhaps our attitude toward our brothers and sisters is at the heart of Hebrews' message to us this day. Take care of what divides us; division is our evil and a sign of unfaithfulness. Our faith will not change some one who doesn't have it. It can only transform each of us who believe.

Jesus is God. Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is our Savior. Why did Jesus want to hide his miracles? Why did he want the man healed of leprosy to keep his healing a secret? The Law of Moses required someone healed of leprosy to do one thing before reentering human society. They had to show themselves to a priest who could verify that they were healed. They then had to offer a gift of thanks to God for their healing. Even the clergy in Jesus time had bills to pay. What use is money to God; God owns everything already. This is called, in the synoptic gospels and especially in Mark, the Messianic Secret. Scholars have debated and probed Jesus' motives since the stories began to be told. Since Jesus has never revealed his motives or reason for his behavior, scripture scholars will never be out of a job. They continue to speculate.

Here is what some, and I, say about it. Jesus' mission was the reason God became a human being. What can you offer the God who made everything? What sacrifice can someone offer for the remission of sin? Who can redeem sinners? The answer is God, God's self. Jesus was the sacrifice. God offered God on the cross to die in our place. This is the reason for the Incarnation and the heart of the gospel. That Jesus took on all our sins, pain, weaknesses and deaths and died for them is the Good News of Salvation. Anything else diverts our attention away from it. Jesus wanted us to know that he was our savior and not a miracle worker. Jesus works defined his ministry to people. Though important, it was secondary to the mission of the cross.

Having said that, Jesus ministry, his service of others became the source and pattern of life his followers then shared as the Church. The way we give witness to our faith in Jesus is through our service of others. Ministry is that service. Ministry is the means by which we show our fidelity to Jesus and the gospel. Jesus saved us. Our salvation has transformed us into Christ's followers. As followers of Jesus we became Christ's living presence in the world. When two or three gather in Jesus' name, he is in our midst.

There's also a truly human motive that Jesus seemed to have had. If I go out to a restaurant, which is something I have not done in almost a year, I don't want the whole world to know that I'm out to dine. I enjoy some privacy and anonymity. Many years ago, I went to an installation of a friend of mine as pastor of a church. I went with a friend of mine and his mom. I carried a tie in my pocket to wear instead of my Roman collar when we went to dine. My friend's mom objected. She wanted to be seen in public dining in a restaurant with two priests. Reluctantly I wore my collar. In the middle of the meal, seeing that there were two priests sitting and eating at a table, someone approached us for council. There is a time for working and a time for dining, especially in a restaurant. My friend went to tend to the issue. I remained with his mom at our table. She then turned to me and agreed that it would have been better to have come in incognito. I think that Jesus also saw the need for privacy and enjoyed the quiet that solitude provides. After Jesus began to perform his miracles for people, everyone sought out Jesus to work wonders for them.

At the heart of these readings is Jesus' mission to die for our sins. Through Jesus' cross we have entered a partnership with him as members of his Church who strive, through service, for the

Kingdom of God. The Kingdom we seek is the purpose of our service. Jesus now ministers through our service.

May God lead us through these troubled and chaotic times to the Kingdom through Jesus.

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