

## FIRST READING

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Daniel 3:25, 34-43

Azariah stood up in the fire and prayed aloud: "For your name's sake, O Lord, do not deliver us up forever, or make void your covenant. Do not take away your mercy from us, for the sake of Abraham, your beloved, Isaac your servant, and Israel your holy one, To whom you promised to multiply their offspring like the stars of heaven, or the sand on the shore of the sea. For we are reduced, O Lord, beyond any other nation, brought low everywhere in the world this day because of our sins. We have in our day no prince, prophet, or leader, no burnt offering, sacrifice, oblation, or incense, no place to offer first fruits, to find favor with you. But with contrite heart and humble spirit let us be received; As though it were burnt offerings of rams and bullocks, or thousands of fat lambs, So let our sacrifice be in your presence today as we follow you unreservedly; for those who trust in you cannot be put to shame. And now we follow you with our whole heart, we fear you and we pray to you. Do not let us be put to shame, but deal with us in your kindness and great mercy. Deliver us by your wonders, and bring glory to your name, O Lord."

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 25:4-5ab, 6 and 7bc, 8-9

***Remember your mercies, O Lord.***

Your ways, O LORD, make known to me; teach me your paths, Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my savior.

***Remember your mercies, O Lord.***

Remember that your compassion, O LORD, and your kindness are from of old. In your kindness remember me, because of your goodness, O LORD.

***Remember your mercies, O Lord.***

Good and upright is the LORD; thus he shows sinners the way. He guides the humble to justice, he teaches the humble his way.

***Remember your mercies, O Lord.***

GOSPEL: Matthew 18:21-35

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew:

Peter approached Jesus and asked him, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus answered, "I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times. That is why the Kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the accounting, a debtor was brought before him who owed him a huge amount. Since he had no way of paying it back, his master ordered him to be sold, along with his wife, his children, and all his property, in payment of the debt. At that, the servant fell down, did him homage, and said, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.' Moved with compassion the master of that servant let him go and

forgave him the loan. When that servant had left, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a much smaller amount. He seized him and started to choke him, demanding, 'Pay back what you owe.' Falling to his knees, his fellow servant begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he had him put in prison until he paid back the debt. Now when his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were deeply disturbed, and went to their master and reported the whole affair. His master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to. Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?' Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt. So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart."

The Gospel of the Lord.

### **Reflection for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tuesday of Lent**

What's in a name? We western, Christian folk choose names of saints for our children. Since the saints live forever with God, that is the hope that parents have for their children; a life with God. Not all cultures have that custom. A priest friend of mine from Vietnam goes by his baptismal, Christian name of Peter. I have met a lot of Vietnamese priests named Peter. These names are picked by a baby's parents, if the one baptized is an infant. It is chosen by the one baptized if the person had reached the age of reason (declared to be seven years old by the Catholic Church, the wisdom of which I question. How many seven-year-olds do you know to be reasonable?). Peter was one of the first disciples and apostles and declared by the Catholic Church to be the first pope. That made Peter's name very popular. The name his parent's gave him, at birth, was Hung. It is a name that means tiger or warrior. Parents choose powerful names, whether of a powerful saint or a powerful entity, to show parental hope for a healthy, productive life for their child.

Today we are introduced to Azariah. His name meant "God helps." His name gave proper context to today's prayer. Azariah prayed for God's help to save him from a fiery death. Azariah was one of the three companions of Daniel, from whose book we have just read. Azariah and the other two companions of Daniel were thrown into a white-hot furnace by the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. The king wanted the three to worship pagan gods and they refused. This story shows the pagan king that God is truly the one God. God saved them in response to Azariah's prayer. God's spirit accompanied the three and could be seen by the pagan furnace tenders moving through the flames with the three Hebrew lads.

Each time I read passages of deliverance from death, I am haunted by history. I imagine Jews praying these prayers as they faced impending execution at the hands of the Nazis during the time of the Holocaust. Did Azariah's prayer bring hope and comfort? Did people despair that God seemed not to be present? God, in this story, saved the three youths. During World War II, God lost eight million of God's people. How does salvation really work? I think, in instances of such inhumanity and evil, forgiveness is the only way. The prayer of Jesus as he died, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," was the way God in Jesus dealt with such evil. We believe that God forgives sinners; as Paul added I add too, "Of whom I am the first." Healing can happen without a cure. Acceptance of self is by God's grace.

The responsorial prayed for God to remember; God's mercies, compassion and each of us. Why would God, the eternal I AM, need to remember? God always is; living in the present as the eternal now. What use does God have for a memory if God has no past? We are the ones who have pasts. We can remember all the times God has shown us mercy and forgiven our sins. We can recall all the help God has given us. We can call to mind all the love we have received. In our act of remembering, God is present. God is just a thought away.

In days of trouble, in a year of pandemic, as we cope with our limits and as we face one another, God accompanies us just as God walked through the flames with the three young men. God's presence is nearer than our breath and pulsing blood. God is as close as thought. God was born a human being. Jesus is fully human and fully divine. God knows what we know and feels what we feel. God guides our steps as we journey to God's Kingdom. The source of our lives and our destiny is God. While we live, we live in God. God's way of love leads to forgiveness and eternal life.

The times we must forgive another is seventy seven? What about seventy eight? Seven is a number that has much cultural, scientific and religious meaning. Seven is a prime number in mathematics. A seventh chord leads our ears to expect the dominant in music. There are seven days in the week. The day of rest is the seventh day, the Shabbat, in the bible and in Judaism. There are seven sacraments and seven deadly sins. David was Jesse's seventh and youngest son whom God chose to be King of Israel. Johnny Cash sang of the seventh son of a seventh son. Seven is also a number related to God's divinity. So, is seven just a number in today's gospel or a symbol of God's transcendent reality?

If seven is a number associated with God's presence, seventy seven symbolizes the fullness of God's presence. There is no seventy eighth time. God, the eternal now, knows no time. Within our relationships God is always there. We can gather together in God's name even if we are angry with each other. God never leaves us. With God's eternal, infinite and unconditional love, how can we not forgive one another?

Today's parable always gives me the willies. When we seek revenge will God seek payback from us? Forever is a long time. Jesus told this story before he died on the cross. Jesus died on it to pay off our entire debt of sin. With his life, Jesus ransomed each of us from eternal retribution. Because of Jesus we no longer have to fear our sin and impending death. Forgiveness is God's path to justice and eternal life. When we find it difficult to forgive another, we can rely on God's love to help us. I imagine Jesus to stand between us both keeping us apart and joining us together at the same time. Jesus is the bond between us and God also between one another. Each of us, as a human being created in God's image and likeness, is God's beloved child. Through Christ we are one.

This passage reflects Jesus' notion of forgiveness in the prayer he taught us to pray. Jesus' prayer, the Our Father puts it this way, "Forgive us our trespasses (or debts) as we forgive those who trespass against us (or our debtors). The frightening word in this passage is "as." Implied explicitly here is when we do not forgive, we pray that God will not forgive us. That is terrifying. Sometimes we have a mistaken notion of what forgiveness is. We do not give in to evil when we forgive. Neither do we let people get away with their bad actions when we forgive. What we do is release our anger and desire for vengeance. I used to work as a field

advocate for the marriage tribunal. An annulment is not like a divorce. With a divorce one or, more likely, both parties will leave the marriage as victims. An annulment can be seen as a way to reconcile and forgive the sin of divorce. Both parties benefit from an annulment's outcome. After it is granted, both parties can be free to remarry in the eyes of the Church.

Forgiveness can be a way to heal pain. Jesus always forgave a person's sins with his miraculous healings. Sometimes we face our feelings for revenge or getting even with a sense of obligation. Forgiving someone can relieve the onus and allow us to be freer to live life. To forgive another person never means that what was wrong is now right. Our forgiveness of someone else does not change them. Forgiveness changes us. That's the key. God forgives and transforms us into new people. When we forgive another our actions transform us; we let go of anger and outrage.

When God is present to us, what is our life like? In times of trouble, we are never alone. In our anger and fear we can know God's love. In our sin and temptation we can know God's forgiveness and healing. When we forgive each other God reveals the extent of God's mercy and love. God works through you and me.

May God's grace help us to live and thrive as flawed people in an imperfect world; perfection is only found in God.

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