

FIRST READING: Jeremiah 7:23-28

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah:

Thus says the LORD: This is what I commanded my people: Listen to my voice; then I will be your God and you shall be my people. Walk in all the ways that I command you, so that you may prosper. But they obeyed not, nor did they pay heed. They walked in the hardness of their evil hearts and turned their backs, not their faces, to me. From the day that your fathers left the land of Egypt even to this day, I have sent you untiringly all my servants the prophets. Yet they have not obeyed me nor paid heed; they have stiffened their necks and done worse than their fathers. When you speak all these words to them, they will not listen to you either; when you call to them, they will not answer you. Say to them: This is the nation that does not listen to the voice of the LORD, its God, or take correction. Faithfulness has disappeared; the word itself is banished from their speech.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9

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

Come, let us sing joyfully to the LORD; let us acclaim the Rock of our salvation. Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us joyfully sing PSALM s to him.

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.

GOSPEL: Luke 11:14-23

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke:

Jesus was driving out a demon that was mute, and when the demon had gone out, the mute man spoke and the crowds were amazed. Some of them said, "By the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons, he drives out demons." Others, to test him, asked him for a sign from heaven. But he knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be laid waste and house will fall against house. And if Satan is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that it is by Beelzebul that I drive out demons. If I, then, drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own people drive them out? Therefore they will be

your judges. But if it is by the finger of God that I drive out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you. When a strong man fully armed guards his palace, his possessions are safe. But when one stronger than he attacks and overcomes him, he takes away the armor on which he relied and distributes the spoils. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.”

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 3rd Thursday of Lent

The major problem for prophets and preachers alike is the answer they give to this question, “For whom are God’s words, messages and commands intended?” If said prophet or preacher answers, “Those who hear it,” does he or she include him/her self? If the one who delivers God’s words, messages and commands does not hear and heed them he or she becomes a hypocrite. That may sound like a harsh judgment, and one I impose on myself, sometimes, but it is essentially true. I must hear and heed in my journey to discern the will of God like everybody else.

The words that Jeremiah used in today’s reading, they heard, heeded and obeyed not are meaningless in the third person. I must hear, heed and obey first. “Do as I say and not as I do,” just doesn’t cut it when preaching the gospel. The question I asked when I heard Jeremiah’s observations on human behavior is, “How do I turn my face to God?” The second is, “How do I turn my back to God?” There is a phenomenon of male behavior that I have experienced. I can be so focused on the search that I can miss seeing what I want to find. This happens when in a store and staring on all the items on the shelf, I can simply not see the single item amid all the others. I can be looking right at it and not perceive the tree for the forest.

When I sit down to write a reflection like this, I want to make sense and offer something helpful and perhaps challenging. Making a masterpiece cannot be my goal, though. To be full of ideas and insight can only come by recognizing my need for God and for God’s word. God’s word can then fill the emptiness in my own soul. Before I turn to fill a page with my words, God’s word first fills me. I turn my face to God in need. I turn to God when I have nothing to write. I turn to God in my weakness and sin. I know that God is the source of all the good I can do. If I were to rely on my wit, cleverness and charm alone, my words are as empty as political promises. In doing that, I would turn my back to God.

Where is God for that matter? God is everywhere. God made all things and all people. God is as part of sunshine and a warm breeze as God is part of the pandemic. God is present in our joy, sorrow, sorrow fear and sin. It is all the case as we accept God’s grace to look and seek for divine presence. We can see God in the faces of all we meet. We can hear God in their voices. We can be changed through God’s grace in all we experience. To begin the day with Jeremiah’s challenging words can be a springboard to the rest of God’s day. When we hear God’s voice, God’s grace will keep our hearts, eyes, ears and minds open.

In this light, our encounter with Jesus is the same. The gospel stories tell us of Jesus' powerful miracles. Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead and cast out evil from people's lives. How does Jesus do this for us? It may be a chance encounter with an old friend or in a simple kindly deed in the supermarket. By God's grace we noticed then or notice now upon reflection. Since God never leaves us, the kingdom of God is always upon us. We never truly leave God's presence. We are always in the process of entering God's presence as we live. When our time comes to enter God's presence fully upon our death our journey to God is complete. When Jesus returns at the end of the age we will rise and rule with Jesus forever.

Jesus' parable can be misleading. Do we guard against Satan? Certainly, we try to resist temptation. However, the harder we try to resist, the stronger they can get. Don't think about pizza! Of what are you thinking? More pizza? Try harder! I would have implanted a more deadly thought, but my goal is to make a point and not lead the reader into sin. How can we resist temptations? We can't avoid them because they just happen. We can rely on Jesus. If we try to envision Jesus standing between us and our desire, Jesus' mere presence in our thoughts can help us to move forward. Jesus' out-stretched arms on the cross can become the buffer between mere temptation and sin. God's grace is amazing.

In Jesus' parable, does he want us to keep someone out or let someone in? Jesus death and resurrection has destroyed the power of death and sin with new life through forgiveness. We all sin. Through Jesus' Paschal Mystery Satan is destroyed. God and the power of love have prevailed against sin and for us. All we need do is turn to God and God forgives. Let Jesus in; Jesus heals not destroys. Jesus fills us with God's love not robs. When we gather together, Jesus is in our midst; we cannot scatter. The Kingdom that's coming belongs to God, as do we through God's gift of faith.

May we know God in all that happens. As of now (written on Tuesday), this day, by God's grace, I go to the United Center to receive my first COVID vaccine.

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