

Lent 4

Morning Prayer A

First Lesson: Exod 16:4-15

Second Lesson: John 6:27-40

Homily

What do we want?

If we follow the story of Israel in the desert, we find them constantly telling Moses just what it was that they wanted: food and drink and comfort.

They lamented the cucumbers, the onions, the garlic, the pots of stew, all the good things they had left behind.

They complained bitterly when God's appointed leader did not provide them.

They knew what they wanted, and so do we.

And, just like them, we have fits of complaining and disappointment when we don't get what we want, or when we don't get it in the way that we want it.

You see, He gave them food, what Scripture elsewhere calls the 'bread of angels', as the Psalm says,

"Thou gavest them bread from heaven, containing within itself all sweetness."

The ground was covered with it.

They called it "manna".

(which seems to translate as, "What is this stuff?")

But it was good food, and it carried them through for the whole long journey to the promised land.

After the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus observed that the people were far more excited about the miracle of the loaves and fishes than they were about the words He had spoken.

He said to them,

"Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat

which endureth unto everlasting life,

which the Son of man shall give unto you..."

What do we want?

It shows, doesn't it, in where we put our effort.

Most of us work really hard.

Americans are known for being hard workers, for working more hours on their jobs than in any other fully developed nation, and we have an impressive degree of prosperity to show for it.

But what is it we want?

More and better cars?

Bigger and bigger homes?

Better vacations?
 Entertainment?
 A larger selection of more sophisticated toys?
 Or perhaps the best college for our kids?

There's nothing wrong with any of that,
 in itself.

They're all good things
 that come from God's bounty.
 We should accept His gifts and give thanks.
 But what do we really want?
 What do we need?
 Where does our major effort go?

Listen again to Him:

*"Labour not for the meat which perisheth,
 but for that meat which endureth
 unto everlasting life,
 which the Son of man shall give unto you..."*
*"For the bread of God
 is he which cometh down from heaven,
 and giveth life unto the world. ...
 I am the bread of life:
 he that cometh to me shall never hunger;
 and he that believeth on me shall never thirst."*

It's a matter of perspective and priority.
 There are a lot of truly good things we might desire,
 but good things become evil

when they separate us from what we really need.
 As He said another time,
*"Where your treasure is,
 there will be your heart also."*

Lent is a time for setting priorities straight.
 What is fasting
 other than setting good things aside.
 so that the better can truly be seen?

There is only one thing needful,
 and that is
 that we know and receive the love of God,
 radiating that love in our very living.

That is also why, by His own institution,
 our worship centers around eating and drinking,
 the living Bread that is His Body,
 the Cup of Salvation in His Blood.

Let us pray.

Grant, Lord, that, in our fasting, we feast upon thy
 presence,
 that in our seeking we seek only Thee,
 and, as we gather at thine Altar,
 feed us, fill us, transform us,
 and call us to dwell with thee forevermore. Amen.

Lent 4

Morning Prayer B

First Lesson: Ezek 39:21-29

Second Lesson: 2 Cor 3:12-18

Homily

Today's readings
give us a picture of prophecy and fulfillment.
Ezekiel speaks of a people
whose "iniquity" and "uncleanness"
have caused the Lord to turn from them,
to hide His face from them, and
to set His glory among another people altogether;
but goes on, speaking for God,
"I will bring again their captivity ...
have mercy on them ... and gather them ...
and all shall know that I am God ...
*Neither will I hide my face any more from them:
for I have poured out my spirit
upon the house of Israel...*"

Once more we see the cycle that forms the core
of the Old Testament Scriptures:
The people in trouble call on God.
God hears and answers.

They follow Him until they tire of it.
They stray and disobey.
Trouble comes,
They call on Him ... and so forth.

It's a cycle we can see even in our own lives.
It seems that that is just what fallen man is like:
unruly, disobedient, self-serving,
and unable to reform and stay reformed.
It's a cycle that, if we had only history to go by,
would look pretty hopeless.
Even the promises
that keep coming from the prophets,
don't give us any real hope.

It always looks as though it's up to us to be good,
that only our own strength and our own
righteousness
will make us able to receive the promises --
and we know that we just don't have either.
It looks pretty hopeless,
but behind it all is great hope,
the hope expressed in St. John 3, verse 16:
"God so loved the world ..."
not just an emotional feeling of good will,
but this kind of real and visible love:
"... that he gave his only-begotten Son ..."
to live and suffer and die and rise again

*"... that whosoever believeth in him,
should not perish, but have everlasting life."*

Behind it all, there is Christ.
Behind it all is the ultimate end of the cycle.
God became flesh and blood
to do what we cannot do for ourselves.
He stepped into our life and paid our price,
and takes our hand as he leads us
on paths our strength cannot manage.

St. Paul reminds us that,
after Moses had met with God,
he wore a veil and hid his face,
so that the people would not see the glory of God.
And why? Was God hiding from them?
Did He not want them to come into His presence?
Didn't he love them and desire them?
We know He did.
So why did Moses hide the glory in his face?
St. Paul seems to answer it this way:
not because it wouldn't be a good thing to see Him,
but that they couldn't see Him.

There was a veil upon their heart.
If they beheld God's glory,
they wouldn't be seeing Him.
They'd be seeing their own reflection,

as the Apostle wrote elsewhere,
seeing darkly in a mirror,
and if you cannot see beyond yourself,
you cannot be saved from yourself,
and by the strength of your own sin,
you condemn yourself eternally,
without hope.
And St. Paul wasn't just talking about the Jews,
way back then,
but about us, here and now.
We try to save ourselves.
We try to be good enough.
It doesn't work. We can't do it.
Their minds were blinded.
The veil still hangs in place,
even when we read the Scriptures,
if we have put it there, and left it there..
But remember, O Christian,
that on the day He died,
the veil of the temple was torn open.
The Way to everlasting life was made clear.
If we turn our eyes upon Jesus,
the Way, the Truth, the Life,
our Hope and our Salvation.

Speaking of our soul he says:
*"... when it shall turn to the Lord,
the vail shall be taken away. ..."*

and, full of hope, we enter in.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who came into the world to save sinners; mercifully grant that we may openly see and acknowledge our sins, and, at thy gracious calling, fly from them unto Thee, that by his Cross and Resurrection, we may come to the joys of everlasting life, through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Lent 4

Evening Prayer A

First Lesson: Isa 55

Second Lesson: John 6:41-51

Homily

"Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters

...

*Seek ye the LORD while he may be found,
call ye upon him while he is near ..."*

So said Isaiah in our first lesson,
but here is what Our Lord said in the second:

*"No man can come to me,
except the Father which hath sent me draw him ..."*

Does that sound as though we are being asked
to do something that we cannot do?

Well, that is a pretty accurate description
of Original Sin.

We were created for one purpose,
and one purpose only,
to seek the Lord and to know Him forever,

but we are so soiled by our inherited sinfulness
that we simply cannot do what we were made to do.
As St. Paul said (in Romans chapter 7),
in words we ourselves might well repeat:
*"O wretched man that I am!
who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"*

Think of Diogenes the Greek philosopher,
wandering about day after day with his lantern,
vainly seeking to find an honest man,
and failing.
Remember Pontius Pilate, hopelessly asking Jesus,
"What is truth?"
St. Paul wrote to his student St. Timothy,
in words strikingly fit for today's world,
of those who are *"ever learning, and never able
to come to a knowledge of the truth."*

We seek and we seek.
There is something in us that has to seek,
but we don't have it in us to find,
except ...
that the Father is drawing us.
Look right now at the Cross on this altar.
See it. Think on it. Listen to it.

...

... <pause>

...

He is drawing us,
 by the life of Christ, by His teaching, by His death.
 The everlasting Word that became flesh,
 He that speaks the words of the Eternal Father,
 says of Himself,
 in the very last book of the Scriptures:
*"Behold, I stand at the door and knock:
 if any man hear my voice, and open the door,
 I will come in unto him,
 and will sup with him and he with me."*

He is drawing us. We are being called.
 The Word made flesh has spoken and is speaking
 the word of our salvation, and, as Isaiah said,

*" ... as the rain cometh down,
 and the snow from heaven,
 and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth,
 and maketh it bring forth and bud,
 that it may give seed to the sower,
 and bread to the eater:
 So shall my word be
 that goeth forth out of my mouth:
 it shall not return unto me void,
 but it shall accomplish that which I please,
 and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it."*

...

"I will come in unto him,

and will sup with him and he with me."
 said Jesus,
 and so it is.
 Week after week,
 every time our priest can be with us,
 we take the bread and the cup,
 and in the reality
 of the awesome sacrifice of Calvary,
 He speaks his own life into those elements,
 and we eat and we drink,
 and we sup with Him and He with us,
 just as He said,

*"I am the living bread
 which came down from heaven:
 if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever:
 and the bread that I will give is my flesh,
 which I will give for the life of the world."*

This season of Lent reminds us of our sin,
 of our need to cry out for mercy,
 and we come to the Lord, at His own calling,
 in sorrow, and, yes, in fear and trembling,
 but in His presence,
 and especially at His Table,
 we find Him, and are touched by Him,
 and, in Isaiah's words, we

*" ... shall go out with joy,
and be led forth with peace:
the mountains and the hills shall
break forth before [us] into singing,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands."*

Let us pray.

Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who came into the world to save sinners; mercifully grant that we may openly see and acknowledge our sins, and, at thy gracious calling, fly from them unto Thee, that by his Cross and Resurrection, we may come to the joys of everlasting life, through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Lent 4

Evening Prayer B

First Lesson: 2 Esdras 2:15-32

Second Lesson: Rev 3:1-12

Homily

All through Lent
we've been thinking about our sins.
We've been fasting and praying,
preparing our souls for the celebration of Easter,
and, more important,
for the eventual entrance into heaven.
We examine ourselves,
and know ourselves to be sinners,
and admit that we,
each of us alone, are the guilty ones,
and there is no one else to blame,
and so we come,
each of us, to Him for forgiveness.
This is right, proper, and necessary.
If I, personally,
am not in a right relationship with God,
then I have no claim on His promises.

But there is another side to consider,

as today's lessons make clear.

It has been said

that there is no such thing as one Christian.

Christians come as part of a family,
as the body of Christ.

"Jesus and me," is only a part of the story,
and, in some respects, a small part of the story.

Yes, Our Lord is leading individuals
toward perfections.

Yes, He desires

to make each individual into a saint of God.

Yes, He certainly does save us one at a time,
but why?

He saves each one of us

to make us part of His holy Bride,
the spotless Bride

that the Holy Church will yet become.

So it is fitting that today, in two Scripture lessons,
we hear three messages from God to His Church.

We're not sure who this Esdras actually was,
but his two books have always been recognized
among those Greek books
that belong with the Old Testament,
the ones we call, "The Apocrypha."
(If your Bible is a Protestant edition

without the Apocrypha,
 well, you really do need a complete one,
 or you miss out
 on beautiful and important passages like this one)

The words we heard from Esdras
 are good advice for any mother
 and should be heeded,
 but that really isn't their main purpose.
 These words are for the people of God
 (Israel then, the Holy Church now),
 the nation or the church,
 seen as mother to her children.
 He has chosen her, and has entrusted her
 to love his children,
 to embrace them, to teach them,
 to direct them in the works of righteousness,
 to protect them from sin and the wiles of the devil.

*"For thy help," he says,
 "will I send my servants Esau and Jeremy,
 after whose counsel
 I have sanctified and prepared for thee
 twelve trees laden with divers fruits,
 And as many fountains flowing with milk and honey,
 and seven mighty mountains,
 whereupon there grow roses and lilies,*

whereby I will fill thy children with joy."

What a remarkable passage!
 The prophets (Isaiah and Jeremiah are meant),
 and the twelve apostles,
 (thus the Scriptures)
 the seven sacraments,
 everything she needs for the work
 she is given,
 and what a list of promises besides!

But, in the Revelation,
 Our Lord speaks to the church in Sardis.
 "Even so, he says, though you look alive,
 you are dead,
*Be watchful,
 and strengthen the things which remain,
 that are ready to die:
 for I have not found thy works perfect before God."*

That sounds like the church of our day.
 We all know about the massive unbelief
 and immorality in "those other" denominations,
 but are we free of formalism and indifference?
 Is it always God we put first?
 Or do we expect to have it all our own way,
 just so long as we say the right words?

These words should scare us a little.
 What we have preserved is in danger,
 even among us, *"ready to die"*.
"Strengthen the things that remain."
 Lent should call us, as a church,
 not only to hold on, but to advance,,
 to find a path to real revival,
 to a revival of Catholic faith,
 and warm-hearted knowledge of God.

In the same place, he looks upon Philadelphia,
 a church that genuinely lives, and says

*"I know thy works:
 behold, I have set before thee an open door,
 and no man can shut it:
 for thou hast a little strength,
 and hast kept my word,
 and hast not denied my name. "*

Only a little strength, but what they have is His,
 and what they face is an open door
 that no one can shut.,
 and to them he says,

*"Behold, I come quickly:
 hold that fast which thou hast,
 that no man take thy crown. "*

Let us pray

O gracious Father, we humbly beseech thee for thy
 holy Catholic Church;
 that thou wouldst be pleased to fill it with all truth,
 on all peace,
 Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error,
 direct it;
 where in anything it is amiss, reform it.
 Where it is right, establish it; where it is in want,
 provide for it;
 where it is divided, reunite it;
 for the sake of him who died and rose again,
 and ever liveth to make intercession for us,
 Jesus Christ, thy Son, our Lord. Amen.