

Limited Time Offer

By Rev. Paul D. Scalia

March 24, 2019 – Third Sunday of Lent

Readings: Exodus 3.1-8a, 13-15; 1 Corinthians 10.1-6, 10-12; Luke 13.1-9

Lent always begins with Saint Paul's exhortation "not to receive the grace of God in vain" (2 Cor 6.1). The Lord extends his mercy and forgiveness; we must receive it in a way that bears fruit. It's a frightening thought, that we could receive his grace fruitlessly, without any benefit to us – which means, in effect, not to receive it at all. At the same time, it is a tribute to our freedom. The divine initiative always seeks our free human response.

In that same Ash Wednesday reading the Apostle impresses upon us the urgency of our response: "Behold, *now* is a very acceptable time; behold, *now* is the day of salvation" (2 Cor 6.2). We must respond not only properly but also promptly, as we will not always have time for repentance and conversion.

Of course, we often delay our conversion or respond to him half-heartedly. His is a severe mercy. We know – or at least sense – that his grace is not cheap but demands something of us. Indeed, it requires that we acknowledge our incapacity, reject the delusions of self-sufficiency, and trust in him absolutely. We struggle to receive his grace because we still want things on our own terms. So, we often receive it reluctantly and by half measures – trying to have both his grace and our autonomy.

It is not enough that the Lord comes to forgive us. He must also find us as responsive recipients to his grace. Lent is the privileged time for shaping our proper and prompt response to his mercy. The readings for this Sunday teach us, in ways both positive and negative, how to respond.

The Call of Moses

The first reading recounts the call of Moses on Mount Horeb (Ex 3.1-8a, 13-15). A fugitive from Egypt, Moses is shepherding the flock of his father-in-law when the Lord appears to him in the burning bush. The Lord proclaims that he has seen his people's affliction, has heard their cry, and has come both to rescue and to lead them "into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey." And he has chosen Moses as the instrument for his work of deliverance.

This is all good news, of course. But Moses betrays a certain reluctance. Several times he raises objections to the Lord's initiative (cf. Ex 3.11-12; 4.1-17). His question "[I]f they ask me, 'What is his [your] name?' what am I to tell them?" elicits the revelation of the divine name: "I am who I am." It is a pivotal point in salvation history. Ironically, Moses asks the question not so much to know the Lord as to avoid the mission.

Moses's reluctance comes from an awareness of what must change. Not only must he do things differently, he must become a different kind of man. If the One speaking from the burning bush is the God of his fathers – "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob" – then Moses must change his life. He cannot dwell among the Midianites, with their strange gods. He must return to Egypt, share his people's suffering, and help deliver them. He rightly senses

that this encounter with the Lord summons him to holiness of life. He discerns the discomfiting call out of the life he constructed for himself and to a life of service, sacrifice, and sanctity.

The Christian life means constant conversion. To respond properly and fruitfully to the Lord's grace requires what Dietrich von Hildebrand calls the "unconditional willingness to change." It demands the continual willingness to rid ourselves of what keeps us from the Holy One and to go where he sends us. Without such willingness, we risk receiving his grace in vain.

A Warning to Us

Moses's slow response foreshadows the obstinacy of the Israelites that Saint Paul summarizes in the second reading (1 Cor 10.1-6, 10-12). At first, they resist Moses's mission in Egypt. Preferring the slavery they know to the freedom they don't, they try to prevent Moses from challenging Pharaoh. Even after the Lord delivers them from Egypt, leads them through the Red Sea, feeds them miraculously with manna, quail, and water from the rock – still they respond poorly. They complain, look back over their shoulders, and long for the flesh pots of Egypt.

Thus, although all the Israelites passed through the sea with Moses and ate the same spiritual food and drink, not all benefited from the Lord's works. They received his gifts in vain. The Apostle presents this as not just a history lesson but a cautionary tale: "These things happened to them as an example, and they have been written down as a warning to us, upon whom the end of the ages has come." He sets the history before us so that we, unlike the Israelites, will respond properly to the time given us for repentance and conversion.

Saint Paul characterizes the principal fault of the Israelites as *grumbling*. It seems such a small thing, to grumble against someone. Although rude and boorish, it hardly deserves "death by the destroyer." But to grumble against the *Lord* – against the One who frees you from slavery, feeds you, and leads you to the promised land – that is gravely wrong. It is to call into question his works and, in effect, to stand in judgment of him.

Grumbling is the response of one who has grown tired of the arduous path from slavery to holiness. The Israelites had become weary of the journey, of the same food and drink – no matter how miraculously provided. They should have rejoiced every morning to find the manna outside their tents. The failure to rejoice led to their grumbling against the Giver. Familiarity breeds contempt, and the Israelites had become too familiar with the Lord's presence and miracles. That is, they had lost the supernatural outlook, the childlike wonder, and joy in his goodness.

The path out of sin and into holiness is long, difficult, and often dull. Many Catholics fall into that tiredness, boredom, and "horror of the same old thing" (C. S. Lewis) that leads to grumbling against the Lord. Rather than rejoicing in the opportunity for repentance, the offer of forgiveness, and the means of sanctification, we come to resent them as impositions. To keep us from grumbling against him, our prompt and proper response to the Lord's initiative must be supported by a persevering joy in his goodness.

The Need for Repentance

Finally, the gospel sets in stark terms the need for repentance (Lk 13.1-9). The crowds bring our Lord a bit of gossip, "about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with the blood of their sacrifices." Their morbid interest is a common vice: the inordinate interest, perhaps even delight, in the tragedies and sufferings of others. We know it well. At the very least, that kind of news provides a distraction from our daily lives. And it sure beats dealing with our own sins and failings.

Moreover, for the ancient Jews this vice also had a theological component: *those* people must have committed some grave sin to deserve that fate (cf. Jn 9.2). Which also means that if no such terrible thing happens to me, then I must be better than they! As our Lord's response indicates, the crowd was more interested in the victims' sinfulness than in Pilate's wickedness.

Our Lord's rebuke both corrects their theology and calls them to repentance: "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were greater sinners than all other Galileans? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!" Then, drawing on what must have been another current news item, he continues, "Or those eighteen people who were killed when the tower at Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty

than everyone else who lived in Jerusalem? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!" (Lk 13.2-5)

He follows with the sobering parable of the barren fig tree. The gardener pleads with the owner for more time to have the tree bear fruit. If at the end of that time the tree remains barren, then it can be cut down. The lesson is twofold. First, that the crowd needs to worry less about what happens to others and more about their own repentance. In our age of digital gawking and gossiping, this lesson applies to us exponentially more. We have so many means to distract us from ourselves and thus avoid the hard work of repentance. Second, our time is limited. Someday the owner will require of us the "fruit of repentance" (Lk 3.8). On that day the gardener will cut down the unrepentant and unfruitful.

On Easter Sunday Mary Magdalene confuses our risen Lord for the gardener. In a sense, of course, she is right. He is the gardener of the fig tree who has gained for us this opportunity - *now* - to bear fruit of repentance. To that end, may our response be prompt, wholehearted, and joyful.

Fr. Paul Scalia is the Episcopal Vicar for Clergy of the Diocese of Arlington, Virginia.

For Further Reading

- [*Catechism of the Catholic Church, ##1422-1498*](#)
- [*Saint John Paul II, Reconciliatio et paenitentia*](#)
- [*Msgr. Charles Pope, "The Times Are Urgent and We Must Heed the Warnings of Our Lady"*](#)
- [*Rev. James V. Schall, S.J., "On Retribution"*](#)

In Short . . .

- *The Lord extends his mercy and forgiveness; we must receive it in a way that bears fruit.*
- *We often receive God's grace reluctantly and by half measures, trying to have both his grace and our autonomy.*
- *Moses's reluctance comes from an awareness of what must change: Not only must he do things differently, he must become a different kind of man.*
- *Saint Paul presents a cautionary tale: The Israelites passed through the sea with Moses and ate the same spiritual food and drink, but some received his gifts in vain.*
- *The parable of the fig tree teaches us that we should worry less about what happens to others and more about our own repentance, for our time is limited.*