

Readings for March 24, 2019 -- Third Sunday in Lent

'Eternal Newness'

Today's scriptures present stories of two trees: the burning bush, that represents the reality of a soul that is receptive to God's presence, and the fig tree, which represents God's presence resisted and refused. (Bishop Robert Barron)

Opening Prayer: (See back prayer pages)

Reading 1 EX 3:1-8A, 13-15

Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian. Leading the flock across the desert, he came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There an angel of the LORD appeared to Moses in fire flaming out of a bush. As he looked on, he was surprised to see that the bush, though on fire, was not consumed. So Moses decided, "I must go over to look at this remarkable sight, and see why the bush is not burned." When the LORD saw him coming over to look at it more closely, God called out to him from the bush, "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Here I am." God said, "Come no nearer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. I am the God of your fathers," he continued, "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob." Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. But the LORD said, "I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians and lead them out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey." Moses said to God, "But when I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' if they ask me, 'What is his name?' what am I to tell them?" God replied, "I am who am." Then he added, "This is what you shall tell the Israelites: I AM sent me to you." God spoke further to Moses, "Thus shall you say to the Israelites: The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. "This is my name forever; thus am I to be remembered through all generations."

Responsorial Psalm PS 103: 1-2, 3-4, 6-7, 8, 11.

R. (8a) The Lord is kind and merciful.

Bless the LORD, O my soul;
and all my being, bless his holy name.
Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits.

R. The Lord is kind and merciful.

He pardons all your iniquities, heals all your ills,
He redeems your life from destruction,
crowns you with kindness and compassion.

R. The Lord is kind and merciful.

The LORD secures justice
and the rights of all the oppressed.
He has made known his ways to Moses,
and his deeds to the children of Israel.

R. The Lord is kind and merciful.

Merciful and gracious is the LORD,
slow to anger and abounding in kindness.
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so surpassing is his kindness toward those who fear him.

R. The Lord is kind and merciful.

Reading 2 1 COR 10:1-6, 10-12

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters,
that our ancestors were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea,
and all of them were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.
All ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink,
for they drank from a spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was the Christ.
Yet God was not pleased with most of them, for they were struck down in the desert.
These things happened as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil things, as they did.
Do not grumble as some of them did, and suffered death by the destroyer.
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.
Therefore, whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall.

Gospel LK 13:1-9

Some people told Jesus about the Galileans
whose blood Pilate had mingled with the blood of their sacrifices.
Jesus said to them in reply, "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!
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!"
And he told them this parable:
"There once was a person who had a fig tree planted in his orchard,
and when he came in search of fruit on it but found none, he said to the gardener,
'For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree
but have found none. So cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?'
He said to him in reply, 'Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it
and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future. If not you can cut it down.'"

Related Reflections

What is fruitfulness?

Do we have to do the most possible good for the poor? Do we have to be highly effective at ministry? Are we supposed to work around the clock so that we can use our gifts to the fullest? What about our jobs? Are we unfruitful if we are unemployed? How hard do we have to work in order not to count as unfruitful? How successful do we have to be at that work?

The thing to notice here is that all these questions rest on a false presupposition. The fruitfulness at issue doesn't come from our work. In [several Gospel accounts] we see owners of a vineyard, who is God, plants the vines, spades the soil, removes the stones, and protects the vineyard. If the vines bear fruit, it is because God worked so hard at the vineyard.

So also our fruitfulness comes not from our own work, but from the work of God's spirit in us. What God is looking for in us, then, is the fruits of the Spirit. And these are love, joy, peace, patience and long-suffering. God has planted himself deep within us in the indwelling Holy Spirit. No lack of success in work, no lack of work itself, can keep us from responding to him with love and joy and the rest. And these are what make us fruitful for the Lord.

(Reflection by Eleonore Stump, Professor of Philosophy, St. Louis University)

MORE ALIVE, MORE HUMAN 32. Do not be afraid of holiness. It will take away none of your energy, vitality or joy. On the contrary, you will become what the Father had in mind when he created you, and you will be faithful to your deepest self. To depend on God sets us free from every form of enslavement and leads us to recognize our great dignity. We see this in Saint Josephine Bakhita: "Abducted and sold into slavery at the tender age of seven, she suffered much at the hands of cruel masters. But she came to understand the profound truth that God, and not man, is the true Master of every human being, of every human life. This experience became a source of great wisdom for this humble daughter of Africa".[30] 33. To the extent that each Christian grows in holiness, he or she will bear greater fruit for our world.

Also:

135. God is eternal newness. He impels us constantly to set out anew, to pass beyond what is familiar, to the fringes and beyond. He takes us to where humanity is most wounded, where men and women, beneath the appearance of a shallow conformity, continue to seek an answer to the question of life's meaning. God is not afraid! He is fearless! He is always greater than our plans and schemes. Unafraid of the fringes, he himself became a fringe (cf. Phil 2:6-8; Jn 1:14). So if we dare to go to the fringes, we will find him there; indeed, he is already there. Jesus is already there, in the hearts of our brothers and sisters, in their wounded flesh, in their troubles and in their profound desolation. He is already there.

(Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate* - The Exhortation, Rejoice and Be Glad)

What drives Christ to pull attention away from speculative matters (the story of the Galileans) and redirect it to a fundamental intercourse between divine and human wills? There is little indication in the episode. However, I fantasize he is moved by a great sadness brought on by the sight of wasted soil and

fruitless trees. I recently read of a very successful business leader who had died. His wife was asked if he was a happy man. She replied that he had trouble with happiness because he was almost “physically revolted by the idea of unrealized potential left on the table.” There is something of that intensity in Jesus’ plea for repentance. (John Shea, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels*, Liturgical Press)

Discussion Questions

- Once again our readings focus on fruitfulness. What is my view of fruitfulness? Has it changed since we looked at it a few weeks ago?
- Do I think it’s the same as God’s view? What is the Pope’s view (above)?
- In the first reading, we see Moses tending his flock and doing simple, everyday things. For us, even though we may not hear an external voice of God, there is an inner voice that calls us to encounter the holy. How can we break away from our habitual perceptions, our patterned responses and actions?
- Where are we called to see and hear more deeply?
- How do we see “I Am Who Am” in the midst of the familiar?
- How can we develop an awareness of the holy within the ordinary tasks, relationships?
- What keeps me from being fruitful? How can I allow the gardener’s care and feeding to be absorbed so that I can bear better fruit. Am I aware of God’s care and nurturing presence in my life?

Closing Prayer:

Almighty God, give us wisdom to perceive you, intellect to understand you, diligence to seek you, patience to wait for you, eyes to behold you, a heart to meditate upon you and life to proclaim you, through the power of the Spirit of our Lord, Jesus Christ. (St. Benedict)

Or:

O merciful God, fill our hearts, we pray, with the graces of your Holy Spirit; with love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control. Teach us to love those who hate us; to pray for those who spitefully use us; that we may be the children of your love, our Father, who makes the sun to rise of the even and good, sends the rain on the just and on the unjust. In adversity grant us grace to be patient; in prosperity keep us humble; may we guard the door of our lips; may we lightly esteem the pleasures of this world and thirst after heavenly things; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

(St. Anselm)

For further meditation this week:

From a homily by Bishop Robert Barron: “The closer God gets the more alive we become... The God of the burning bush is the God who wants you to be fully alive.”

Consider listening to the full homily at: <https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/homily/a-tale-of-two-trees/875/>

Suggested Music:

Beautiful Things (Gungor OR Shane & Shane)

New Every Morning (Audrey Assad)

10,000 Reasons (Matt Redman)