

Sunday, March 18, 2018

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Meditation and Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

Mass Readings:

1st Reading: Jeremiah 31:31-34
Responsorial: Psalm 51:3-4, 12-15

2nd Reading Hebrews 5:7-9
Gospel: John 12:20-33

Experiencing God's Mercy and Love, and Sharing it with Others

Create a clean heart in me, O God. (Psalm Response)

Today's Responsorial Psalm portrays King David's response to God after he had committed adultery ordered Bathsheba's husband to be killed in battle. David was known as a man after God's own heart, but this story looks more like something you would see in a soap opera than what you would see in a man of God.

What's worse, David couldn't even see that he had done anything wrong—that is, until God sent Nathan the prophet to open his eyes. That's where today's psalm comes in. So what can we learn as we pray this psalm along with David?

First, often we cannot see our own sins, both our small sins and our big sins. Lust, selfishness, pride, self-righteousness, anger—any of these can blind us, just as they blinded David. *Thank you, Lord, for sending people to me who can help me to grow in holiness.*

Second, God always pursues us, both when we are close to him and when we are separated from him. He always pricks our minds. He always sends angels and other people to help us. He does what he can, by any means, to help us confess our sins and draw closer to him. *Lord, help me to be more sensitive to your touch each day.*

Third, God's mercy is unfathomable. Even David's acts of adultery and murder didn't keep God from pursuing him and fulfilling his plan for the king. The moment we repent, God's love and mercy will well up in our hearts, just as it did for David. *Thank you, Lord, for your faithfulness.*

Finally, look at the last two lines of this psalm. David is promising that if God forgives him, he will do his best to lead other people to him. A desire to serve and care for other people is the natural response to God's mercy. Lord, use me for your purposes.

"O God, have mercy on me. Create a clean heart in me. Fill me with your Holy Spirit, and I will share my faith with everyone around me."

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Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion:

1. The first reading opens with these words: "The days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers the day I took them by the hand to lead them forth from the land of Egypt ... this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel ... I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer will they have need to teach their friends and relatives how to know the LORD."
 - In what way is the "new covenant" that the Lord promises in this reading much different than the old covenant?
 - What do you think these words from the first reading mean: "No longer will they have need to teach their friends and relatives how to know the LORD"?
2. The responsorial psalm is King David's great prayer of repentance after he had committed serious sin: "Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness; in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense. Thoroughly wash me from my guilt and of my sin cleanse me. A clean heart create for me, O God, and a steadfast spirit renew within me."
 - How would you describe David's prayer of repentance? What do you think was the fruit of it?
 - How does David's reaction, reflected in this psalm, compare to your reaction when faced with sin in your life?
3. In the second reading, we hear these words: "In the days when Christ Jesus was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."
 - What do these words mean to you and how do they apply to your own Christian walk?
 - What is your reaction to suffering in your life? In what ways has it caused you to grow closer to Jesus and deepened your faith and dependence on him?
4. In the Gospel reading, Jesus continues to focus with increasing clarity on his coming passion and death: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ... I am troubled now. Yet what should I say? Father, save me from this hour"? But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour. ... Now is the time of judgment on this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself."
 - In what ways do Jesus' words point to his passion, death, and resurrection?
 - Notice that Jesus uses the term "hour" three different times in these verses. What do you think he meant by this term? How would you describe what was accomplished by this hour?
5. In the Gospel reading, we also hear these words of Jesus: "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life."
 - Can you give an example from your life when serving and following Jesus caused persecution or suffering, but yet you were able to see God work a mighty "good" and produce "much fruit" in your or someone else's life?
 - With Good Friday and Easter fast approaching, what additional steps can you take to fulfill these words of Jesus, and produce "much fruit" in the remaining days of Lent?
6. The meditation is a reflection on the Response used in the responsorial psalm: "Create a clean heart in me, O God." It describes three things we can learn from this psalm: "First, often we cannot see our own sins, both our small sins and our big sins. ... Second, God always pursues us, both when we are close to him and when we are separated from him. ... Third, God's mercy is unfathomable." The meditation ends with these words: "Finally, look at the last two lines of this psalm. David is promising that if God forgives him, he will do his best to lead other people to him. A desire to serve and care for other people is the natural response to God's mercy. Lord, use me for your purposes."
 - What is your reaction to the three things we can learn from this psalm as described in the meditation?
 - The last two lines of the responsorial psalm is "Give me back the joy of your salvation, and a willing spirit sustain in me. I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners shall return to you. Do you agree that "A desire to serve and care for other people is the natural response to God's mercy"? Why or why not?
7. Take some time now to pray and ask God for his mercy and "a clean heart." Also, ask for a fresh infilling of the Holy Spirit to share your faith with others. Use the prayer below from the end of the meditation as the starting point.

***"O God, have mercy on me. Create a clean heart in me. Fill me with your Holy Spirit,
and I will share my faith with everyone around me."***

[The discussion questions were created by Maurice Blumberg, who is currently a member of the board of directors of the **ChristLife Catholic Ministry for Evangelization** (www.christlife.org/) and a member of the **National Service Committee Council of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal** (www.nsc-chariscenter.org). Maurice was also the founding executive director of the **National Fellowship of Catholic Men** and a former chairman of the board of *The Word Among Us* (www.wau.org). He can be contacted at mblumberg@wau.org or mblumberg@aol.com.]