

Sunday, March 10, 2019

First Sunday of Lent

Meditation and Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

Mass Readings:

1st Reading Deuteronomy 26:4-10

2nd Reading: Romans 10:8-13

Responsorial: Psalm 91:1-2, 10-15

Gospel: Luke 4:1-13

Treating Others as God Does, *With Patience, Grace, and Love*

You will be saved. (Romans 10:9)

In today's second reading, St. Paul tells us that confessing that Jesus is Lord and believing in his resurrection will bring us to the ultimate goal of our lives: heaven itself. But this is one of those "gospel truths" that comes with an asterisk attached.

We recite the Nicene Creed at every Sunday Mass. It's another version of Paul's confession of faith. So if we say it with faith, isn't that all we need to do to get to heaven? Not exactly. Remember, even the devil believes that Jesus is the "son of the Most high God" (Luke 8:28). Remember too that Jesus warns us, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 7:21).

Clearly, there must be more to this than simply reciting the truths of our faith. Something has to happen inside of us as well. Something has to come into us to change us and make us become more and more worthy of the gift of eternal life. And that something is faith.

Faith in Jesus sanctifies our hearts. It directs the affections of our hearts toward Jesus. It moves us to say no to sin. The devil's "belief" didn't sanctify his heart. It didn't move him to have any affection for Jesus. If anything, it made him hate Jesus all the more. That's because he didn't put his faith in Jesus.

Every day this Lent, the Holy Spirit wants to move you toward a deeper faith, a faith that strengthens your love for Jesus and other people.

Think of it this way. Married couples know that love involves much more than saying and believing the words "I love you." They know it means staying united, serving each other, working out differences, and putting each other above themselves. Likewise, confessing Jesus as Lord and believing it in your heart is much more than accepting a fact and saying it. Confessing and believing is a way of faith. It's a way of life.

"Jesus, I believe that you are the Savior of the world. Let this faith continue to sanctify my heart."

(Many thanks to *The Word Among Us* (www.wau.org) for allowing us to use meditations from their monthly devotional magazine. Used with permission.)

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Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion:

1. In the First Reading, Moses reminds the people of all that God has done for them: *When the Egyptians maltreated and oppressed us, imposing hard labor upon us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and he heard our cry and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. He brought us out of Egypt with his strong hand and outstretched arm, with terrifying power, with signs and wonders; and bringing us into this country, he gave us this land flowing with milk and honey. The reading ends with these words: Therefore, I have now brought you the first fruits of the products of the soil which you, O LORD, have given me. And having set them before the Lord, your God, you shall bow down in his presence.*
 - Why do you think Moses told the people that the way to personally express their gratefulness and thanks to God for being set free from slavery in Egypt should be offer their *first fruits* to God and *bow down in his presence*?
 - Each of us has been set free from slavery to sin, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What are some *first fruits* you can offer to God out of gratefulness to Him for this wonderful work?
2. The Responsorial Psalm opens with these words: *You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, say to the LORD, "My refuge and fortress, my God in whom I trust."* It ends by describing the many promises of the Lord: *Because he clings to me, I will deliver him; I will set him on high because he acknowledges my name. He shall call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in distress; I will deliver him and glorify him.*
 - The Psalm calls on us to *say to the LORD, "My refuge and fortress, my God in whom I trust."* What are the obstacles that can keep you from saying these words and seeking your strength in the Lord? How can you overcome them?
 - How do the many promises of God described in the Psalm apply to what the Lord has done in your life?
3. The second reading begins with these words: *What does Scripture say? The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart—that is, the word of faith that we preach—for, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The reading ends with these words: For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, enriching all who call upon him. For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."*
 - In what ways do you agree or disagree with the reading concerning what it takes to be *saved*?
 - Considering that one day all those who are *saved*, whether Jew or Greek (or any other ethnic group), will be together in heaven as one body in complete unity, what are the prejudices in your life God might be asking you to eliminate?
4. In the Gospel reading, the devil tempts Jesus with these words: 1) *If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.* 2) *I shall give to you all this power and glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I may give it to whomever I wish. All this will be yours, if you worship me.* 3) *If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written: He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you, and: With their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone.* In the reading, we also see the power of the Scriptures to fight temptations, as Jesus quotes the truths of Scripture in response to each of the lies and temptations of the devil.
 - How would you summarize the temptations of the devil towards Jesus in the desert?
 - What can you learn from how Jesus used the Word of God, the Scriptures, to fight the temptations of the devil?
 - How often do you use Scriptures (the Sword of the Spirit) as a weapon against the devil's temptations?
 - What are some steps you can take during Lent that will allow you to spend more time reading and meditating on Scripture – and more regularly?
5. The meditation is a reflection on the Second Reading and ends with these words: "Every day this Lent, the Holy Spirit wants to move you toward a deeper faith, a faith that strengthens your love for Jesus and other people. Think of it this way. Married couples know that love involves much more than saying and believing the words 'I love you.' They know it means staying united, serving each other, working out differences, and putting each other above themselves. Likewise, confessing Jesus as Lord and believing it in your heart is much more than accepting a fact and saying it. Confessing and believing is a way of faith. It's a way of life."
 - Do you believe that "confessing Jesus as Lord and believing it in your heart is much more than accepting a fact and saying it"? Why or why not?
 - During this grace-filled Lenten Season, what are some steps you can take to "move you toward a deeper faith, a faith that strengthens your love for Jesus and other people"?

Take some time now to pray and ask Jesus for the grace to deepen your faith in him and surrender more of your life to him as Lord and Savior. Use the prayer below from the end of the meditation as the starting point.

"Jesus, I believe that you are the Savior of the world. Let this faith continue to sanctify my heart."

[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), a member of the National Service Committee Council of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (www.nsc-chariscenter.org), and a board member of The Love of Christ Foundation. Prior to this, Maurice was the founding executive director of the National fellowship of Catholic Men, a chairman of the board of *The Word Among Us* (www.wau.org), and a director of partner relations for The Word Among Us Partners ministry. He can be contacted at mblumberg@wau.org or mblumberg@aol.com.]