

Homily For Tuesday of the Fifth Week of Lent - Year I

St Peter's 8:30am Mass- Tuesday, March 23, 2021

Numbers 21:4-9 "The people said: We have sinned by speaking against the Lord."

Psalm 102:1-2,15-20 "O Lord, let my cry come to you. Do not hide your face from me in my distress."

John 8:21-30 "As Jesus was saying these things, many believed in him."

The Son of Man Lifted Up

Introduction

Too bad they didn't have 'Skip the Dishes' during the desert wanderings of the people of God. Forty years is a long time to eat the same meal of manna and quail every day. I think we can probably understand their complaining. Some of us have been doing a lot of complaining about limitations on going to restaurants and having to eat home cooked meals.

We didn't call it manna when I was growing up, but we did have potatoes every single night, and I seem to recall doing some complaining about it, although I doubt very much if I would have gotten away with saying, like the Israelites in the desert: "We detest this miserable food." I don't think my mother would have resorted to poisonous snakes to let us know we had gone too far but, like Moses, she did not accept any lack of appreciation for her efforts to provide us nourishing meals.

Both of today's readings are seem quite harsh. But the message is absolutely critical for us. Sin is the lack of appreciation for what God has done for us. Sin is the lack of response to what God is doing right in front of us. These readings today, as many are during Lent, are a wakeup call.

Numbers

It is true that the desert experience was not easy. It was a time of testing. It was a time of having to learn to trust in God. They kept forgetting how bad it was to be a slave. They kept losing the fact that the God who had brought them out of slavery was providing them with all of their needs. But this is always the way with

us, as it was with them. When we don't have what we think we should have, we complain bitterly. And yet, when we have all of the riches this world has to offer, we forget about God entirely.

The result of their complaining is that the people get one of the things they worshipped as gods in Egypt. They get snakes. This is a reminder of their slavery and it has the right effect. The response is profound. "The people came to Moses and said: We have sinned by speaking against the Lord."

We should also see an echo of how the first sin came through a serpent, the devil. This will be important because that serpent is still prowling the earth, seeking the ruin of our souls and the end of our worship of God who has provided the means to save us from sin, which we did not have before.

For the Israelites, the remedy was the bronze image of a snake lifted up on a pole. When they had been bitten, they only had to look up at the image to be healed so that they would not die.

Now we are not to think for a moment that an inanimate object formed in the image of a snake had been given magical power to heal. We are to see that God healed those who looked up and repented of their rejection of the God who saved them. The psalmist today has this absolutely correct: "The Lord looked down from his holy height, to set free those who were doomed to die." In each case, it is the underlying spiritual life and death that is at issue.

John

With this in mind, we are ready to consider just how important it is that Jesus uses this image of being lifted up. When Jesus repeats himself, we are always to take special note. But how about this in John's Gospel. Jesus to Nicodemus in Chapter 3: "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Jesus to his disciples in Chapter 14, the Gospel passage from this past Sunday: "Now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." Jesus to the people in Chapter 8, today's passage: "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he."

Call To Action

Today it is still a matter of life and death. It is so obvious to see that the world has focused entirely on physical health and the fear of physical death, but appears to have stopped believing in spiritual health and being afraid of the much more important spiritual death. We might hear the echo of God's words to the rich fool: "What does it profit someone to gain the whole world but lose his soul."

Bible scholar, Dr. Tim Gray, puts it like this: "We have all been bit by the serpent devil. We have all taken the poison of sin into our souls, which makes those souls mortal. We will all die because we are mortal. But, by looking at Jesus lifted up on the cross, we can be healed of the ancient serpent's bite which is so toxic and deadly.

Jesus says to those in front of him who refuse to believe: "You will search, but you will die in your sins." But John also tells us that many believed in him. If we acknowledge that we have been serpent bit; If we confess that we have sinned; If we will look upon Jesus lifted up on the cross, and ask forgiveness, we will be healed and saved. Will he kill himself, they asked? No, he will voluntarily lay down his life, for us.

Lent is about sin and penance so we can look at Jesus during Holy Week and be forgiven and return to him. We are invited to find a crucifix and spend some time looking at him on the cross, lifted up so that we might be healed.

Key Passages

Entrance Antiphon: *Wait for the Lord. Be strong. Be stout-hearted.*

Collect: *Grant us, we pray, O Lord, perseverance in obeying your will, that the people dedicated to your service may grow in both merit and number.*

Numbers: *The people spoke against God and against Moses: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." The Lord sent poisonous serpents and they bit the people, so that many died. The people came to Moses and said: "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord." So Moses prayed for the people, and the Lord said: Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole. Everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live."*

Psalms: *O Lord, let my cry come to you. Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress. The Lord looked down from his holy height, from heaven, to hear the groans of the prisoners, to set free those who were doomed to die.*

John: *Jesus said to the people: "You will search for me, but you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come ... You are from below. I am from above. You are of this world. I am not of this world. You will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he ... The one who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him." They did not understand that he was speaking about the Father. So Jesus said: When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak as the Father instructed me." As Jesus was saying these things, many believed in him.*