

Homily For Tuesday of the Fifth Week of Lent - Year I
St Peter's 8:30am/7:00pm Masses - Tuesday, March 28, 2023

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

Psalms 102:1-2,15-20 "The Lord looked down and set free those who were doomed to die."

John 8:21-30 "When the Son of Man is lifted up, then you will realize that I am he."

Look To A Crucifix

Introduction

Years ago, while walking through south central France, it was easy to notice that there was a little crucifix on top almost every corner of the rural fences. Everywhere, the path followed sheep and cattle grazing properties, and there was Jesus on the cross. There was only one possible explanation. Those cows were Catholic.

We met an older woman there who was also walking the same pilgrimage route. She looked with great sadness, and even disgust, at the crosses on the fences. She told us that she was tired of being near 'that tortured man', as she called him. As we walked, we found out more about her life of suffering. To her, the crucifix was just a painful reminder of her own sadness.

The primary Christian art is a crucifix, with the corpus showing the suffering of Jesus, with the wounds. There is a tradition of a crucifix being visible to a sick person in their bed. Spiritually, we carry the poison of sin that is still with us from the bite of the ancient serpent. When we look up at him who was crucified for our sin, we are healed. His torture is our healing.

Numbers

This passage from Numbers always makes me think of the reaction I would have gotten as a child if I had said: I detest this miserable food. That would not have gone well. I may even have tried it once or twice. That would have been considered a great sin. There was no saying, like we might in a restaurant, where we are paying top dollar for our food: Send it back. This isn't what I ordered.

This sin would be the lack of appreciation for what my mother had prepared for us. It is the same when we complain against God, who has made us only to receive his blessed life in us.

So they spoke against God and against Moses. There even seems to be confusion about the problem. There is no food here in this desert. And, by the way, the food is miserable. To tell God our troubles can be a beautiful prayer. To whine at God is not so much. It's a kind of blasphemy. It is all about us and not God. God can send us help in times of trouble, but He is more likely to discipline us for our own good if all we are going to do is whine and complain.

Whining becomes a comfortable state of being. We can become dependent on it, regardless of whether our situation is good or bad. This is exactly the human tendency when it comes to our relationship with God. That is what the Israelites in the desert said to Moses and to God: We hardly remember that you brought us out of slavery. We don't remember how bad was that slavery, and we don't like this manna you are feeding us.

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. The result of their complaining is that the people get one of the things they worshipped as gods in Egypt. They get snakes, poisonous ones.

It turned out to be the right discipline because they got it. The response is profound. The people came to Moses and said: We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you. Remember the Prodigal Son, who was far away from God and dying when he made up his mind to go to his father and say: I have sinned against heaven and against you. Jesus could have told that parable straight from the Book of Numbers, just changing the names and a few details.

God tells Moses to make an image of the very snake that poisoned them, and to put it up on a pole. Once the confession of sin had taken place, just looking at the image on the pole healed the poisonous bite.

John

Jesus' words to his listeners should strike us to the heart, "I have much to say about you and much to condemn." Then he refers to the snake on a pole in the desert. Who are you, they ask? He responds, "When you lift up the Son of Man then you will realize I am he." I AM is the name of God. To look with faith upon the image of the Son of Man, who is God, is healing for the effects of the ancient serpent's bite. Without this image and this faith, and looking upon Jesus on the cross, there is only everlasting death.

Where I am going you cannot go, Jesus says. Why not? Will he kill himself, they ask? Always thinking about physical death, but Jesus is talking about the greater death, that of the soul. The best they can come up with is a worldly idea, that he will end his own life. That unbelief is exactly where the idea comes to end the life of the unborn and the elderly, and now even youth who are depressed.

Will he kill himself? No, he will voluntarily lay down his life, for us. Could we reflect a bit more on that awesome mystery as we approach Good Friday? You will die in your sins if you do not look upon the one who is lifted up. Jesus is on the cross for the sin of those in the desert and those before and after.

Without faith in Christ, we hear him say: "You are from below and I am from above. You are of this world, I am not of this world." But we also hear him say: "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he."

Call To Conversion

When we look up at Jesus lifted up on the cross, we see the actual wounds that are caused by the sin of the people. Yes, 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, if we confess that we have sinned, and look at Jesus lifted up on the cross, we can be healed of the ancient serpent's bite which is so toxic and deadly.

Today it is still a matter of life and death. A Gospel without the Cross, infected by the pagan world's emptiness of the redeeming value of suffering, places us in deadly peril.

We look up at the elevated host, the Real Presence of our Lord. And, if we keep looking up, we see the crucified Christ, lifted up. This is the great and definite sign of the Father's love towards the fallen humankind. Not just the tortured man but the healing of our souls.

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.*