

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

St Peter's 8:30am Mass - Tuesday, March 9, 2021

Daniel 3: 25, 34-43 "With a contrite spirit may we be accepted as though it were with ten thousand fat lambs."

Psalm 25: 4-9 "The Lord instructs sinners and leads the humble in his way."

Matthew 18: 21-35 "One who owed him 10,000 talents fell on his knees: Have patience and I will pay everything."

A Certain Kind of Math

Introduction

Today's scripture passages make it look like you have to be good at math to understand the ways of God and, especially, to know how to receive his greatest gift, his mercy. At the half way point in Lent, we really do need that understanding. What are we doing during this time if not turning back to God, falling on our knees and asking him, like the first servant in Jesus' parable, for patience and mercy, which he already wants to give us. Azariah summarizes the state of he and his people he compares to the sacrifice of tens of thousands of lambs. Jesus tells a parable of debt forgiveness that looks like it will take knowing calculus to figure out.

In high school, I figured I was good enough at math to consider a career in a math related field. But, at university, I found that I was somewhat overwhelmed by that next level of calculus and algebra, and ended up going in a different direction. Now that may have had a little to do with the lack of the right attitude towards study on my part. But that is also the point today. It's not really about the numbers. It's about our attitude before God. Consider these two events from Sacred Scripture and see if they relate to us.

Matthew

As is often the case, Peter takes leadership and asks, on behalf of the rest of the disciples, the question about forgiveness. The way he phrases the question is very good. He already knows that you have to forgive more than once. In fact, he uses the number seven, indicating completeness of forgiveness. Seven is the number

of creation, including the creation of rest and worship on the seventh day. So, Peter's question is both practical and theological. He's got the basic math correct.

But Jesus wants to stretch Peter's understanding. He wants him to go to the next level. You are on the right track but there is much more, but it's not just seven times. It's seventy seven times. Another translation comes closer. It's seven times seventy. That's seven times seven, ten more times.

To illustrate the size of this quality of forgiveness, Jesus tells the story, familiar to us, of a king and two servants. Spoiler alert, the king is God and the servants are us. The debt owed by us to God is in the order of 10,000 talents. A talent is the largest coin denomination in the Roman Empire. Not too many will even have seen one. Each talent is worth 6,000 denarii. If we do the math, ten thousand talents times six thousand denarii is sixty million denarii. It is a ridiculously huge number on its own. But then, if you compare it with what the one servant owes the other, 100 denarii, the difference is sixty thousand to one.

You can check my math after. I could be wrong. But, that's the point. We do not have to be good at math to realize that God is offering an unbelievably greater amount of mercy to us than we could possibly ever be asked to offer each other. That is why, if we are serious about our return to God, we need to appreciate that God's mercy to us is without limit. Nowhere in our earthly experience can we receive the measure of mercy God is offering us. The hard part for us is NOT how we can come up with the payment. It's whether we will humble ourselves to ask.

The second requirement follows from the first. It says in the parable that the king released him. Knowing how much of a burden of the debt due to us because of our sin, we cannot receive that mercy unless we are willing to offer it to those who are in debt to us. It's not a math problem. It is the law of mercy. Understand our need for his mercy, receive it, then offer it to others. This is not easy, of course. It may be the hardest thing we can ever do. That's why it begins with a contrite heart, a humble spirit. If not, we will essentially be responsible for our own torture until we can pay every last penny, which is impossible. That's the hardest part of the math. It can overwhelm us OR we can turn back to God and ask him to give us the grace to do what he does for us.

Daniel

Azariah admits that he is in the fire because of the sins of the whole people. We have been brought low because of our sins. We have lost everything: prophets, leaders. We can't even properly plea for mercy because we have no place to make an offering.

Half way through Lent, Azariah's prayer could be ours, both as individuals and for the people of God. They have become despised by the nations. So it is with the Church. We are brought low because of our sins. People want to leave the Church because of the loss of its reputation. But when the people of God become humble, God pours out healing and mercy and renewal becomes possible.

Call To Action

At its best, even the secular world recognizes that forgiveness is not easy. One of the points in an article I read on the topic reminds readers that forgiveness is a process. For us, Lent IS that process by which we, little by little, turn our attitudes to contrition so that we might receive the forgiveness. We have to ask for it with contrite spirits. We also have to give it without holding back. These are the keys to our salvation. At least, that's what the math says.

Key Passages

Entrance Antiphon: *To you I call, for you will surely heed me, O God.*

Collect: *May your grace not forsake us.*

Daniel: *Azariah, condemned to death, stood still in the fire and prayed aloud: Do not withdraw your mercy from us, whom you promised to multiply descendants like the stars and like the sand. We, O Lord, have become fewer than any other nation, and are brought low this day because of our sins. We have no ruler or prophet or leader or sacrifice or incense, no place to make an offering before you to find mercy. Yet with a contrite heart and a humble spirit may we be accepted as though it were with tens of thousands of fat lambs.*

Psalms: *Make me to know your ways, O Lord. Be mindful of your mercy and your steadfast love. Do not remember my transgressions. The Lord instructs sinners. He leads the humble in his way.*

Offering Prayer: *We pray that this saving sacrifice may cleanse us of our faults.*

Matthew: *Peter said to Jesus: Lord, if a brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times? Jesus answered: Not seven times, but seventy seven times. The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. One who owed him ten thousand talents fell on his knees saying: Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything. Out of pity, the lord released him and forgave him the debt. His fellow slaves were greatly distressed and reported to their lord, who said: You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave as I had mercy on you? And his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*