

Forget the past, live anew

5th Sunday of Lent – Cycle C – 7 April 2019

Readings: Isa 43:16-21; Phil 3:8-14; Jn 8:1-11

“Do not remember the former things ... I am about to do new thing” (Is 43:18-19)

“I forget the past and strain ahead” (Paul) *“Go, and sin no more”* (Jesus)

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The first reading is taken from that section of Prophet Isaiah popularly called ‘Second Isaiah’, spanning chapters 40-55. This period of Isaiah’s prophetic ministry can be located in the late 6th century BC, when Judah was suffering under Babylonian rule. Physically, psychologically, economically, culturally and religiously, the people felt the might of Babylon and the misery of the Exile. In this context, through the mouth of Isaiah, God identifies Godself as “the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse... they are extinguished, quenched like a wick!” (vv.16-17). The image is stirring and visual, and highlights the power of God over both the forces of nature and military might. Obviously, the prophet evokes the cultural memory of the foundational event of the Passover—the miraculous rescue of the people passing through the Red Sea (Exodus chapters 14 & 15)—and exhorts his people to place their hope and trust in God. By telling the people “Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold I am doing a new thing ..” Isaiah depicts God as a God of newness and surprises. The “new thing” is the return from Exile, which will pave the way for a new identity and renewed life.
2. Scripture scholars believe that the gospel passage of the ‘woman caught in adultery’ does not belong to the original Gospel according to John since it has the tone and touch of evangelist Luke. Be that as it may, some details of the scene are revealing. The scribes (i.e., copiers of the law, thus religious ‘experts’) and the Pharisees (those of the strictest Jewish sect—Acts 26:5), break into the assembly, bringing a captive woman. They drag the woman before Jesus and say: “Teacher [probably sarcastically], this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now, in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” Jesus knows fully well that they ask this question not because they thirst for truth, but because they want to trap him. He is ‘caught in a fix’, so to say. On the one hand, if he says, “Yes, stone her, kill her!” he will lose his reputation as a compassionate healer besides getting into trouble with the Roman powers because only they could pronounce the death sentence; and, on the other hand, if Jesus says, “Do not kill her,” he will be accused of subverting the Mosaic Law. What does Jesus do in this predicament?
3. Jesus can clearly see the anomalies of the situation. First, if this woman was caught *in very act* of adultery, then her male partner, too, should have been caught and dragged before Jesus, since the law was equally applicable to both, men and women (see Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22). Why use double standards? Secondly, Jesus

starts to write on the ground with his finger. This is the only mention of Jesus writing something. What he wrote no one knows. But his words, “If there is one of you who has not sinned, let him be the first to throw a stone at her,” were like missiles and his writing finger seemed to unmask all their hypocrisies. At this, “they went away one by one beginning with the eldest,” perhaps since the elders were greater sinners than the others. Then Jesus looks compassionately at the woman and says, “Go away and sin no more.” Jesus wants her to forget the past and begin life anew. Once again, he represents the God of promise and newness.

Link of the Second Reading to the Main Theme:

In the second reading Paul responds to some opponents who could either be Judaizers hell bent on imposing Jewish Law and traditions on Gentile converts to Christianity or some ‘enthusiasts’ who mistakenly believe that they’re already saved through Christian baptism. By contrast, Paul describes his life as an ongoing race – “I have not yet won, but I am still running, trying to capture the prize for which Christ Jesus captured me.” Paul has lived two lives, so to say. In the first part of his life as a staunch Pharisee with strict adherence to the Law, and as persecutor of the Church, he boasted of a “righteousness of my own, based on law.” But, in the second part as Christian, he counts his previous life as “a loss”. All he desires is not salvation through rituals and laws, but through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ. All Paul earnestly wants now is “to gain Christ”.

Three Current Concerns

The Tyranny of the Past: Our past can be imprisoning. It can create morbid guilt and paralyzing fear that kills. That’s the difference between Peter and Judas – same sin, but different outcome. During Lent, Jesus invites us to let go of our past, to live in the present, and to be optimistic of the future. He says: “Race ahead, sin no more! I am doing a new thing.”

The Overdependence on Law: There is need for some rules and regulations for smooth living among individuals and communities. However, if applied without reference to people, human situations and current contexts, the law becomes oppressive. Modern-day Pharisees are those who categorize, critique and condemn all others.

The God of New Things: The Exodus and the Exile are reminders of God’s power and presence. Yes, God accompanies us always—leading us to fuller, better lives.

In Lighter Vein: A holy woman was reportedly receiving divine apparitions. Her parish priest demanded proof of their authenticity. “When God appears to you,” he said, “ask God to tell you my sins known to God alone. That should be evidence enough.” The woman returned a month later and reported that God had appeared to her again. “Did you ask God that question?” asked the priest. “Yes,” replied the woman, adding, “And God said, ‘tell your parish priest I have forgotten his sins!’”

Reflection: God forgets your sins and mine since God forgives me and you, sinners. As response, rather than being stuck to the past, let us be aware of all that is happening in the present, and let us journey towards a future—one that is created by God alone.
