

Lent 3--Cycle C

(Exod 3:1-8,13-15; 1 Cor 10:1-6,10-12; Luke 13:1-9)

Early in Lent it should be easy to notice how prominently Exodus is found--the Book, the event, themes from the book. It should not be difficult to understand why this should be so. Easter, toward which Lent is directed, is, after all, the great exodus, the great deliverance from sin, from damnation, from all that separates us from God. So we begin the narrative with Israel in slavery--aptly symbolizing our state of slavery before our deliverance by Christ.

Along with this theme of deliverance is that of God's love--both of these themes are combined in our first reading this morning. God's love is seen in every line. Here is God, the maker of all, who might have identified Himself as Creator of heaven and earth, says instead, "I am the God of your father." He tells Moses that He has witnessed their affliction, heard their cry, has "come down." This is the God of love whose love leads Him to compassion, whose compassion now impels Him to call Moses to lead His people out of slavery in Egypt. Anyone who thinks God reveals Himself as a God of vengeance in the OT, as a God of mercy in the New has never read the Bible. This God of love and mercy is the same God we now worship, the God who will send His only Son to die on the cross to redeem us.

On this same occasion God reveals His ineffable name. Moses resisted this commission of leading Israel out

of Egypt, foreseeing how much suffering it would entail. He offered every objection: he was a nobody that no one would listen to--much less the Pharaoh of Egypt; he was a poor speaker. To all of which God's response was "I will be with you." That should have settled the matter, but Moses persisted. He says the Israelites will ask, "What is His [this God=s] name," thinking God would refuse to reveal it. Therefore his insistence on knowing it was part of this stratagem because he thought that God would refuse to reveal it. But God in His love is gracious, and He answers, "I am who I am. This is what you will tell the Israelites, I AM has sent me to you. [The LORD] YHWH the God has sent me to you. This is my name forever, this is my title for all generations." This ineffable name took much of its sacred character from the context in which it was revealed--on Mt. Sinai, at the moment God was revealing His intention of delivering Israel from bondage.

We learn still more when Moses goes on to ask to see God's face. It is axiomatic that no one can see God's face and live. So God cannot grant that favor, but in His graciousness He allows Moses to see His back as He passes by; along with the vision He reveals something of His very being. As Exodus tells the story, "The LORD came down in a cloud and stood with him there and proclaimed the name 'LORD.' So the lord passed before him and proclaimed: The LORD, the LORD, a God gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in love and fidelity, continuing his love for a thousand generations, and

forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin (Exod 34:5-7a). This is how God of mercy reveals Himself at the moment He begins His great work of redemption, and this is how He continues to reveal Himself, as attested in innumerable passages in which these words are repeated in countless variations.

The prophet Jonah even had the temerity to quote the Lord's own words as an excuse for disobeying the Lord's command to preach the destruction of Nineveh: "O LORD, is this not what I said while I was still in my own country? This is why I fled at first toward Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, repenting of punishment" (Jon 4:2). An important part of Lent is to remind us of God's mercy.

But there is more. Psalm 99, speaking of the exodus period, says "Moses and Aaron were among his priests, ... O Lord our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God, though you punished their offenses." Indeed He did punish offenses; Moses, in fact, was not allowed to enter the Promised Land. St. Paul in today's reading from Corinthians is speaking of that wilderness generation; that generation experienced in type what we experience in reality, namely, baptism (cloud and passage through the Red Sea) and Eucharist (Manna and water from the rock). Yet with many of them God was not well-pleased and they suffered death by the destroyer. Their sin? Grumbling! (Occasion for examination of conscience.)

And the gospel reinforces that lesson. Jesus urges on us the need to repent, that is, to emend our lives (otherwise,

"you likewise will perish," He says). And He gives us the parable of the barren fig tree. Nothing could be more apt for Lent--demonstrating the need to be better in order to avoid being "cut down"--and time for probation is given for the amendment. The gardener one year, we 40 days.

What is not mentioned in all this, but is the most important element, is that Jesus came not only to teach us by word and example, but also to make reparation, atonement, expiation for us. This sort of action appears in type or image in the OT (the paschal lamb, the serpent in the wilderness, the Suffering Servant of the Lord). If God is so willing to forgive, why is the atoning death of Jesus Christ a crucial part of the process? You may go through learned volumes on the topic without finding a satisfactory explanation; even the New Catechism of the Catholic Church, the word **Atonement** doesn't appear in its 66 pages of index, and I'm not going to attempt to explain it. My only explanation is that it comes to us as revelation. Of Isaiah's "Servant of the Lord" it is said that "He was pierced for our sins, crushed for our iniquity. ... We had all gone astray like sheep but the LORD laid upon him the guilt of us all." Jesus identifies Himself as this Servant when He says, "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for the many." He provides what would otherwise be lacking--reparation for our sins. The need for this may not be crystal clear but it's deeply rooted in Catholic theology and faith, apparent in every page St. Paul wrote. That God should lay the guilt of all us

straying sheep on the innocent Jesus doesn't seem fair--is not fair, but it demonstrates that love of the Father and the Son for us, which St. John so wonderfully summed up: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

Lent is about returning that love; that is what God asks of us. It is also John who tells us how to do that, recounting endlessly Jesus= words, "Love one another as I have loved you" and explaining further, "This is the commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother." One need only read the daily paper to know how much hatred there is in the world. Whole groups mowed down who are hated not as individuals but as pertaining to a race, a nationality, a religion.

You have your program for Lent. Don't despair: remember the parable of the leaven, that a little bit can transform the whole mass. Understand the meaning: the leaven is love and it is able to tame the fiercest hate.