

Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings

Second Week of Lent 2018



Sunday, February 25: *"Brothers and sisters: If God is for us, who can be against us?"* (Rom 8:31b-34)

St. Paul is not posing a rhetorical question here. He is sharing his lived experience. What do you think of when you hear the words "God is for us?" What does someone who is "for us" do? I think of someone who has my best interests at heart; someone who encourages me in both success and failure, who assists me when I need help, instructs and guides me when I am heading in the wrong direction; someone who stands by me when others are against me. Do you believe God is "for you?" Do you accept this in your heart of hearts, or do you just mouth the words? Are there conditions—"Of course, God is 'for me'... as long as I am 'for God.'" I can't expect God to be 'for me' if I have turned away from him?"

Today's provision—Reflect on God's Unconditional Love: Do you know yourself as "a sinner loved unconditionally by God?" I heard that on retreat recently. The retreat leader (who is a Jesuit) said that is the first question asked on an assessment as to whether a particular person is ready to move on in priestly formation. It needs to come first—that heart- and soul-level knowledge that, come what may, God is always in my corner. This realization should come as great joy, washing over you! Yes, of course, you are unworthy. God knows that and you should know and accept that too. But don't let it ever stand in the way of your faith that God is for you, now and forever!

Monday, February 26: *"For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you."* (Lk 6:36-38)

You've likely heard the word, "karma," an essential teaching in Eastern philosophies and religions often associated with the concept of reincarnation—that you will suffer or enjoy happiness in your next life based on how you have been living this life. But the word itself is Sanskrit for deed or action and has as much to do with our present life as it does any future existence. It is exactly what Jesus is saying here. And it's interesting to note that, as in Christianity, changing one's karma can be achieved through taking responsibility for one's actions, seeking forgiveness, and loving unconditionally. So if you think your past has tipped the scales against you, think again. God's love and mercy has the power to right even the most unbalanced of lives.

Today's Provision—Reflect on Your Life: If you haven't noticed yet, the Spirit seems to be leading us in a Lent full of reflection: considering and contemplating the reality of our lives; pausing auto-pilot to spend time in quiet prayer. So take time today to reflect on your life. I know that's a tall order, but do it gently. It is not a time to feel guilt or shame. Instead look at the giftedness of your life, the good that has come from hardship and sin, the unmerited graces, the undeserved light. Claim your life and offer it back to God. Ask God to enlighten you to see those places that need tending. Give thanks for the times you have been able to do God's will. Rest just as you are in God's embrace. *"You need only claim the events of your life to make yourself yours. When you truly possess all you have been and done ... you are fierce with reality."* (Florida Scott-Maxwell, from *The Measure of My Days*)

Tuesday, February 27: *"Cease doing evil; learn to do good."* (Is 1:10, 16-20)

Despite evidence to the contrary, I cling to the belief that all creation, humans included, are born inherently good. Philosophers have debated this for centuries: Are human beings basically good or evil? Are we Locke's "tabula rasas"—blank slates—that develop our basic nature as we grow? Or, does good and evil cut through the heart of every human being, as Solzhenitsyn proposes. Do we need to, as God says through Isaiah, "learn" to do good? I think life is about recapturing our basic goodness—our inherent God image—that can be clouded over or even locked away by the hardships and traumas of life and illness. Perhaps it is not so much learning to *do* good as it is learning *what* good really is. Learning that God looks at us and finds us good. Learning that good isn't so much about what is good for me alone, but what is good for the other and for the entire Body of Christ.

Today's Provision—Reflect on what is "Good:" In his spiritual exercises, St. Ignatius of Loyola puts a great deal of emphasis on the concept of discernment of spirits and on what he describes as feelings of consolation and desolation. These feelings are not the same as happiness or sorrow, elation or grief I recently heard the words quiet and disquiet used as another way to capture the meaning. We've all probably experienced such feelings: I can be in what looks like a sad, difficult life or situation and still be at peace, feeling God's comfort and knowing God is with me. Conversely, I can be living what appears to be a happy and successful life, and yet can't ignore the nagging empty or anxious feelings inside. Spend time today reflecting on experiences that have spoken to your inherent good. Consider times you have put aside what might have seemed good for you for what was truly good for another, and allow that consoling feeling to warm your heart. You don't need to learn to do good—you already know how. You just need to practice it every day!

Wednesday, February 28: *"Come, let us contrive a plot against Jeremiah. It will not mean the loss of instruction from the priests, nor of counsel from the wise, nor of messages from the prophets."* (Jer 18:18-20)

We don't want to hear what we don't want to hear. We have our worldview and woe to the person who questions or disrupts that view. We surround ourselves with people and media that confirm what we believe. The people of Judah do not see Jeremiah as a prophet. He is a rabble-rouser who exposes the power structure for what it is. Every age has its rabble-rousers *and* its real prophets, usually on multiple sides of every issue. My worldview and my neighbor's can be so vastly different. What are we to do?

Today's Provision—"This is my Beloved Son. Listen to Him:" We heard this gospel on Sunday. I struggle to come to terms with how the message I hear from Jesus corresponds to the message that other Christians seem to hear. And I am sure they might look incredulously at me as well. Perhaps, instead of judging and disparaging those whose worldview is different or trying to change another's view, I am called to dialogue, to sit and listen to Jesus' words together with those who hear something other than what I hear. Do you find yourself at odds with a family member or friend? Do you barricade yourself behind walls that do not allow for different viewpoints? Invite "the other" to lunch, or maybe to a Bible study. See if you can find common ground.

Thursday, March 1: *"There was a rich man who...dressed in purple garments and fine linen and dined sumptuously each day. And lying at his door was a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who would gladly have eaten his fill of the scraps that fell from the rich man's table."* (Lk 16: 19-21)

For those of us blessed with plenty, this parable can really give us pause. Will we be punished for the abundance we enjoy in our lives? I have to wonder if the rich man is even aware of Lazarus. Do his servants protect their master so he is not burdened by such a repulsive presence? Or perhaps the rich man is just so caught up in his own life that he doesn't even notice the poverty right in front of him. Are riches really his downfall, or is it his blindness? Those blessed in this life are called to share what we have, and not just the scraps. Each of us is called to give from our very hearts to those less fortunate. Let's make sure our blessings don't blind us to the need right outside our door.

Today's Provision—Give of Yourself: Along with prayer and fasting, giving our time, talent, and treasure is part of our Lenten obligation. There's an expression—"give until it hurts." There are saints among us who can do that, but for the rest of us, look to give from where it is most uncomfortable. If money is tight, think about what you can forgo and donate to causes that have meaning to you. If you struggle to be around people outside your comfort zone, find an opportunity to serve. If you think what you have to give is not important, get over your fear and share who you are.

Friday, March 2: *"He sent a man before them, Joseph, sold as a slave...bound with chains..."* (Ps 105)

We read in the Genesis story of Joseph about the evils of jealousy and envy. We can also see in the story how good can come of evil if we are patient and allow God's hand to bring about salvation. Joseph, the victim of his brothers' treachery, is the one who sees how God takes his suffering and brings about good. Is there suffering in your life? Are the evils evident in today's world causing you to despair? Can you see past the sorrow to salvation?

Today's Provision—Pray and Work for Good: Reflect today on how you might bring about something positive from a past hurt or wrong. I don't mean platitudes about God's will. I mean real growth from darkness. Pray the Spirit will guide you to begin the process of mining for the precious gifts buried in the hardened rock of life.

Saturday, March 3: *"A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me.' So the father divided the property between them."* (Lk 15:1-3, 11-32)

You're the father in this story. How do you respond to this son's request? In his book, *Return of the Prodigal Son*, Henri Nouwen points out that by asking for his inheritance, the young son is basically wishing his father dead. If you've been or have raised a teenager, you may see this situation as the culmination of many prior conflicts. I'm not sure I could be as generous (or "prodigal"—foolishly generous) as this father. I might be willing to let my child go, but not with his or her pockets lined with my hard-earned money. This part of the parable is all about free will. God gives us our very lives, complete with great gifts and talents, that God hopes we will use for the good of his Kingdom. But we often turn away and strike out on our own, gifts intact, to squander them on things that can never bring us lasting peace. Isn't it amazing we have such a wonderful, generous, merciful God who watches and waits to welcome us home!

Today's Provision—Reflect on Our Free Will: This story isn't just about comparing us to rebellious children. I imagine very few of us wish to turn away from God so dramatically. In fact, I know for myself, I often don't even realize when I am using my free will to move ever so slightly away from God: when I opt to keep to myself rather than speak out against injustice; when I trust human constructs more than the wisdom of the Spirit; when I purchase things I don't really need just to have the "latest and greatest." Spend time reflecting on how you use your gifts, not from a standpoint of self-recrimination, but just so that you can have greater awareness as you go about your day, and can show gratitude to God by the way you use your freedom. (This parable, found only in Luke's Gospel, is rich with meaning. Some lesson or message can be derived from almost every verse. I suggest you read it carefully as if you are reading it for the first time. See what insights the Spirit offers you.)