

Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings

First Week of Lent 2019



Sunday, March 10: *"I have now brought you the first fruits of the products of the soil which you, O LORD, have given me." (Dt 26:4-10)*

Have you ever noticed sports figures who make the sign of the cross before stepping up to the plate, kicking a field goal, or shooting a foul shot? Occasionally, you'll see someone bless themselves and point skyward after a touchdown or a goal, but I'd say most times, we invoke God's favor to help and keep us safe *before* we set out to do something.

The Israelites, like most human beings, have a tendency to overlook the gifts God has given them, particularly when things are going well. Moses reminds them to say thanks and give credit where credit is due. It's easy to lose sight of the big picture and feel pride for accomplishments which would have never come to fruition without our God-given gifts. Praying for God to help us ahead of time is wonderful, but do we always remember to thank God after our achievements—even if that achievement is just making through the day?

Today's provision: Give Thanks and Praise to the Lord for His Gifts. Pride in our accomplishments is not a bad thing; we always want to encourage others, especially children, by pointing out the good effort they have put forth, and congratulate those who've been able to achieve something they set out to do. But consider taking it one step further—again, particularly with children—and praise them for their willingness to use the gifts God has given them. It's a subtle way to recognize their contribution, but also to remind them that who they are and what they bring to the world is a gift from God. Try to remember this week to end each day by giving thanks and praise for all God has given you.

Monday, March 11: *"You shall not steal...lie...swear...defraud or rob...withhold wages...curse the deaf...put a stumbling block in front of the blind...act dishonestly...spread slander...stand by idly when your neighbor's life is at stake...bear hatred..." (Lv 19:1-2, 11-18) "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me...in prison and you visited me." (Mt 25:31-46)*

Eleven "you shall nots" in Leviticus—sins of commission. This is like the Ten Commandments in that most have to do with what we should not do. It's no wonder we hold onto childish notions of sin and the mistaken idea that we somehow control God's wrath. Now of course, God's commandments are essential. I am not dismissing that we are called to avoid sin. There are clearly some "thou shalt nots" the world seems to have forgotten! But in the famous passage, the Judgment of the Nations, from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus puts our actions in a different light. The tone is positive. Note he does not tell us what to do—he does not say, "you shall..." The choice is up to us.

Today's Provision—Give from Your Heart. I always remind myself of a key insight from this reading in Matthew: neither the sheep nor the goats recognize Christ in the hungry, the thirsty, the ill, etc. The sheep give out of the goodness of their hearts. This is so important. God knows if we are "a cheerful giver" (2 Cor 9:6-7) or whether we are giving out of obligation, to gain recognition, or to win heaven. God sees if judgment or bitterness taints what we give. Consider what *really* moves your heart to compassion. Maybe it's the plight of immigrants or foster children; the elderly or abandoned animals. The more we learn to give from our hearts to people and things that move us, the more our hearts will be open up to those we tend to judge or dismiss. Give some thought to how you can truly give.

Tuesday, March 12: *"In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think they will be heard because of their many words...Your Father knows what you need before you ask him." (Mt 6:7-15)*

Then why do I pray? And why don't I always get what I pray for? Reasonable questions, I guess, if my prayer is all about me. If I am praying to get what I want or to get to heaven, frankly I'm not really praying. I'm babbling, talking *at* God. Sometimes we need to babble; we have so much in our minds and hearts that we just have to get it all out on the table. But we don't often take time to listen, to be still and let God answer us. Real prayer comes when we, like Peter at the Transfiguration, abandon our plans and schemes, and are rendered speechless by God's directive: "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him."

Today's Provision: Pray to Learn to Pray: *"If my prayer is centered in myself, if it seeks only an enrichment of my own self, my prayer itself draws my attention and longing away from God and toward myself. I am left rich, alone and nothing can assuage my hunger." (Thomas Merton)* If prayer feels good, but you're still left with longing or a feeling you've not been heard, it might just be you are centered on yourself rather than on God. Pray the Our Father slowly and deliberately, considering each phrase and what it means. Pray that the Spirit will teach you how to pray, and keep plugging away. The answer may come when you least expect it.

Wednesday, March 13: *"Neither man nor beast, neither cattle nor sheep, shall taste anything; they shall not eat, nor drink water. Man and beast shall be covered with sackcloth and call loudly to God."* (Jon 3:1-10)

The king of Nineveh has declared a dramatic fast. The Jewish scholar, Robert Alter, calls this image of the animals being covered in sackcloth and crying out to God a classic example of Hebrew hyperbole: *"All this amounts to a kind of hyperbolic farcical representation...after Jonah's message, the city is so caught up in a profound impulse of penitence."* Now the Ninevites were reacting out of fear, and faith based on fear won't last, but you've got to hand it to them. When they declare a fast, they mean business! No halfway measures for them!

Today's Provision: Fasting from Half-Hearted Fasts: As I write this a few days before Ash Wednesday, I am still praying about my fast for Lent. So often, I wind up picking something last minute--or mid-way through Lent--that doesn't have much meaning to me. I don't want my fast to be self-serving (although any serious fast will be good for me), but something that will keep my eyes focused on God. Have you decided on a fast? Look seriously at things that distract you from God. Negativity, perhaps? Pray to be enlightened and led to that which will lead you closer to God.

Thursday, March 14: *"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds."* (Mt 7:7-12)

This passage can be a stumbling block for people. "I always ask God for things. I am always seeking something. But rarely do I get what I ask for. Rarely do I find what I am looking for." Chapters 5, 6 and 7 in Matthew contain a lot of Jesus' more difficult teachings: The Beatitudes, lessons about anger and retaliation, loving enemies, total dependence on God. I wouldn't be surprised if a few of the disciples questioned him as they did about the parables: "Lord, how are we to do all this? How can we possibly 'be perfect as the Father is perfect?'" Jesus answers them, "No, we can't do these things on our own. We ask God for patience. We ask God for compassion. We seek God through prayer. We ask God to show us the way, to show us his will." Jesus prayed a fervent petitionary prayer in the garden before he suffered, but he ended his prayer as we too should end all our prayers: "Thy will be done."

Today's Provision—Pray for What You Really Need. I've shared this quote before. It really gets at this idea of praying for what we really need: *"If you had the choice, which would you choose: the granting of your petition or the grace to be peaceful whether it is granted or not?"* (from *Taking Flight*, by Anthony de Mello, SJ) Spend time considering what you really need from God. Prayers of intention are wonderful. We always want to add our prayers for petitions and people near and dear to us. Jesus is not telling us we shouldn't pray for things we *want*; he is challenging us to think differently about what we *need*, and to use prayer to open ourselves up to God's will.

Friday, March 15: Friday, March 15: *"If you bring your gift to the altar, and recall your brother has anything against you, leave your gift, go and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift."* (Mt 5:20-26)

In the part of the Talmud known as The Mishnah, it states: *"For transgressions against God (and those against ourselves), the Day of Atonement atones (for those who are sincere in repentance); but for transgressions of one human being against another, the Day of Atonement does not atone until they have made peace with one another."* (from *Gates of Repentance*, 1978) Though it was not codified in writing until the early third century, CE, this is a basic tenet of Jesus' Jewish faith. And it makes sense, doesn't it? How can we come to offer ourselves at the altar if there is hate or vengeance in our hearts? That is not to say we should avoid church or the sacraments if we are struggling with forgiveness or bitterness. As Pope Francis tells us, *"the Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak."* (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 47) The altar is a powerful place where we will find the strength to forgive or to ask for forgiveness.

Today's Provision—Pray for the Gift of a Reconciled Heart: If you struggle with the need for reconciliation in your life, pray God will give you courage to resolve the hurt. But what if the person or issue in question is long gone? What if they refuse to listen or acknowledge the problem? What if revisiting the past brings more pain? Forgiveness and reconciliation are a state of the heart, and while our greatest peace may come from mutual resolution, it is not always possible. But that doesn't mean you can't find peace. Pray God will help you release whatever binds you.

Saturday, March 16: *"You have heard it said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies...pray for those who persecute you...For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? ...And if you greet your brothers and sisters only, what is unusual about that?'"* (Mt 5:43-47)

I am always struck by the clear logic Jesus uses in this passage. It's true—what's so special about loving those who love us, or being friendly only to those we know? Most everyone does that. But I am equally struck with the command to love and pray for our enemies. Okay, I can see not hating them. Hate is evil and destructive. But can we just commit to ignore our enemies, to tolerate them? Even to accept them? Why do we have to love and pray for them?

Jesus tells us the only way to achieve peace in our world is to love—everyone—even those who hate and would destroy us. If we hope for peace, then each of us must live these words every day.

Today's Provision: Give Love to Everyone. I don't consider anyone my "enemy;" I can't think of anyone I hate. But I can sure think of people I ignore or just tolerate! Let's pray today for the gift to love those we find hard to love.