

Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings

Second Week of Lent 2019



Sunday, March 17: *"Their minds are occupied with earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven... Therefore, my brothers and sisters... stand firm in the Lord."* (Phil 3:17-4:1)

I don't know about you, but my mind is occupied with earthly things a lot. Like most of the day. It's understandable. We are human, we live on earth. We are surrounded by other humans who are also occupied with earthly things. In this letter, Paul is reminding the Philippians not to be overly concerned with the Law--"earthly things" like food restrictions and circumcision that can get in the way of true faith, but rather to stay focused on the cross of Christ. That's good advice for us too. At times, we can get so caught up with the "do's and don'ts" of rules and rites and rituals that we lose sight of the true mission Christ has set for us: to be bearers of his love.

Today's provision: Fast from Reliance to Earthly Things. Paul says our citizenship is in heaven. I ask myself: "When people meet me, is that evident to them? Or do they see someone wrapped up in the things of this world—the 24/7 newsfeed, the latest style or gadget, the hot topics and gossip? Or someone who judges them based on how well they follow the rules of my chosen religion or agree with my politics or stance on hot-button issues?" "Do they feel welcomed to become a citizen of heaven too?" Earthly things like religious rules are not bad in and of themselves—I can name lots of far less noble things that command my attention each day! It is our inflexible adherence to rules at the expense of mercy and compassion, and our tendency to default to them instead of to loving others that causes the problem. Let's make sure to stand firm in the Lord today and true to our role as heavenly citizens.

Monday, March 18: *"O LORD, we are shamefaced, like our kings, our princes, and our fathers..."* (Dn 9:4-10) *"Let the prisoners' sighing come before you; with your great power free those doomed to death."* (Ps 79)

Shamefaced pretty much captures it. With the abuse and secrecy from years past coming to light now in religious institutions; with salacious scandals at the highest levels of government, I sometimes find it difficult to justify my continued involvement—not to anyone else, but to myself. Two things help me when my strength is flagging: the knowledge that my faith does not lie in institutions, but in God and the values of the Christian faith and democracy I espouse; and, Jesus' words to the crowd ready to stone the woman caught in adultery, *"Let he or she who is without sin cast the first stone."* Those who have committed or abetted crimes must pay their debt to society, but are they outside the realm of prayer? *"Can true humility and compassion exist in our words and eyes unless we know we too are capable of any act?"* (St. Francis of Assisi)

Today's Provision: Pray for Those Imprisoned. It's easy (although we might forget) to pray for those imprisoned unjustly; those who are prisoners in their own homes or countries or as refugees; those imprisoned by mental and physical illness; victims of abuse. But how about those whose lives are locked up in addiction? What about those who are guilty of crimes—heinous crimes—they have committed? I read stories everyday of violence and death in the city near where I live. I read report after report of sins committed by leaders in my Church, and I admit it is very hard for me to pray for the perpetrators. But that is my prayer intention for today: to pray for those I find it hard to pray for, and remembering too, to beat my chest in sorrow for my own sins. Will you join me?

Tuesday, March 19: *"I will raise up your heir after you, sprung from your loins, and I will make his kingdom firm. It is he who shall build a house for my name."* (2 Sm 7:4-5,12-14,16)

And the house Jesus is building in God's name is under construction to this day. It needs a constant stream of laborers and craftspeople and decorators and repairers to make it habitable and comfortable and ready for the next generation. It needs people willing to tend the surrounding garden and care for the animals; people to greet newcomers and visitors that drop by to check things out. Daily maintenance is really important so that God's house remains the welcoming place Jesus intends. What talents and skills do you bring to this amazing house Jesus is building?

Today's Provision: Give Your Talents to Build God's House. Remember the three Ts of giving: Time, talent, and treasure? I know too many people who dismiss their talents, believing they have nothing to offer, no skills to help construct God's house. We forget it is the everyday gifts that make the biggest difference--a smile, a helping hand, an encouraging word--little things that build up both the other and the Kingdom. What are your gifts? If you don't know, ask God to show you or ask others who know you. Maybe you are a whiz at knitting or accounting or computer repair. There are so many opportunities out there to teach others a calming skill, to help the newly hired create a budget, to train young people to learn a trade. *"Let us build (together) a house where love can dwell and all can safely live."*

Wednesday, March 20: *"...Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave."* (Mt 20:17-28)

Show of hands, please. How many of you like being first? First in line, first in your class, first to finish the race? OK, next question: How many would like being a slave? Hmmh. Just as I thought. Have you ever really considered Jesus' words here? We have heard them so many times that they roll right past us and we take no heed. Almost everything Jesus teaches is counter-cultural—actually diametrically opposed—to so much in modern society, it is a wonder I have the audacity to call myself Christian. (I'm a practicing Christian, I say—just practicing. Nowhere close to getting it right!) Have you ever prayed to God for the gift of humility? It might not be high on the intentions list, but often comes wrapped in a package of embarrassment given to you when you least expect it!

Today's Provision: Pray for Humility. C.S. Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*, *"True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less."* It's hard for us, since, like it or not, by virtue (?) of our humanity, we tend to see ourselves as the center of our world. And there's a big difference between true humility (which does not make a show of it) and false humility (which is all for show). It's not about abasing or demeaning ourselves, and it does not discount our giftedness, but recognizes from whence our gifts come. And that they are given to benefit God's Kingdom. True humility knows what it has to offer and trusts in God to use it as it is needed. Consider this today and how this plays out in your life. How are you called to serve?

Thursday, March 21: *"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)

The translation I use says the rich man *"made merry every day in a splendid fashion."* It makes me think he might not even have been aware of Lazarus. The rich man is so caught up in his own life that he gives no notice to the poverty right in front of him. It gives me pause. What am I missing? How do my blessings blind me to the desperate need outside my door?

Today's Provision: Fast from Blindness. This takes constant awareness and engagement, a willingness to be in places and look at things we just as soon ignore. The story we read today talks of hunger and the disproportionate distribution of resources, but it's also about dignity, of recognizing the existence and rights of those less fortunate, and feeding them not just the scraps, but inviting them to a place at the table. How will you fast from blindness today?

Friday, March 22: *Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age... They sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. (Gn 37) "He sent a man before them, Joseph, sold as a slave...bound with chains..."* (Ps 105)

Have you ever thought about how quickly Joseph's life gets torn apart? He goes from being the favored son to sold as a slave in a matter of hours. I think about people in countries plagued by civil wars who have gone from living a comfortable life to abject poverty in a matter of months. It has to be surreal. The psalmist tells us God has a plan, but as Joseph is being led off in chains (by Ishmaelites no less), I wonder if he is so sanguine, so sure of God's intentions. I doubt it. Life can change in a split second. We can go from peace to turmoil so fast it makes our heads spin. How do we keep ourselves grounded in God when the world is falling apart around us?

Today's Provision: Pray for Courage. I don't normally pray for things like courage. Sure, when things are challenging, I might consider it, but it doesn't cross my radar much. But as I get older, I realize it might be good to add some prayers for courage. I hope my faith will provide the firm ground I need if I am ever faced with dramatic change or loss, but I realize courage is needed for everyday things as well: the courage to recognize my limitations; the courage to say "no" to adding another thing to the 'to do' list; the courage to let go and lighten my load for the remainder of my journey. Think about adding a prayer for courage to face the challenges of each day, storing up graces for the tough times, and confidence in God's providence and care.

Saturday, March 23: *"Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits. (Ps 103)*

Marketing 101: What's a feature? What's a benefit? A feature is an attribute of a product or service. A benefit is what that feature does for the consumer. A house may be energy-efficient (a feature), but the benefit is in saving more money in the long run. One way to look at it: a feature is a "what" and a benefit is a "so what." What benefits do you receive from knowing God? For example, God is merciful and the benefit is that we need not live under the yoke of shame. God is omnipresent, with us 24/7; we need not fear the darkness. God is loving; when all else fails us, we can be strong, confident we are loved unconditionally. Each time you hear of God's majesty and power, think about what it means to you. Forget not the harvest of benefits we reap from God's awesome presence in our lives.

Today's Provision: Give Praise and Thanks to God. I bet God likes thank you notes that are specific. You know, not the ones that say "thank you for the nice gift..." but instead, "thank you for the strength and grace you gave me today to face that person at work." "Thank you for helping me keep silent today when I was angry." "Thank you for forgiving me the sin of..." Write God a note today. Say thanks for the awesome benefits you have received.