

Readings and Sermons for 3rd Sun Before Lent

5th Feb 2012

Readings

Isaiah 40:21-50

21 Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? 22 It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; 23 who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. 24 Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. 25 To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One.

26 Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing. 27 Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, 'My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God'? 28 Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. 29 He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. 30 Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; 31 but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

16 If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe betide me if I do not proclaim the gospel! 17 For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission. 18 What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.

19 For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. 20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. 21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some. 23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

Mark 1:29-39

29 As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 30 Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at

once. 31He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

32 That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. 33And the whole city was gathered around the door. 34And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

35 In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. 36And Simon and his companions hunted for him. 37When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' 38He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.' 39And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

More Encounters with God!

The God who speaks to us in these readings isn't a distant God. This is a God who speaks to us personally and wants us to listen personally. As the modern translation of Isaiah says, in The Message,

²¹⁻²⁴ "Have you not been paying attention?
Have you not been listening?
Haven't you heard these stories all your life?"

God then points to the wonders of the earth, to the wonders of the skies, and then the contrast of world rulers, who are of no weight in comparison. Something we do well to remember, and pray about as we look at the pain and confusion being brought about by world rulers in the Euro crisis, in the instability and fear of rising conflict in Syria and Iran, and the distress of long-term famines, civil war and oppression due to unrighteous rulers in our world.

Here is the invitation to put these things in a different perspective by not just looking with external eyes, but looking to encounter the Living God Himself.

"So—who is like me?
Who holds a candle to me?" says The Holy.
Look at the night skies:
Who do you think made all this?
Who marches this army of stars out each night,
counts them off, calls each by name
— **so magnificent! so powerful! —**
and never overlooks a single one?

If you've ever had the chance to look at the stars away from all the city lights out on the darkness of the moors, you've perhaps had this sense of the unending depth of the stars. And yet, God speaks to us each individually, as in this next verse to His people.

Why would you ever complain, O Jacob,
or, whine, Israel, saying,
'God has lost track of me.
He doesn't care what happens to me'?

Here is God's word:-

'Don't you know anything? Haven't you been listening?
God doesn't come and go. God lasts.
He's Creator of all you can see or imagine.
He doesn't get tired out, doesn't pause to catch his breath.
And he knows everything, inside and out.' "

Listen more to this invitation:-

“He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.

²⁹ He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.

³⁰ Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;

³¹ but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.”

The Creator doesn't call the strong or the mighty, he calls **all**, with special regards to giving power to the faint and strength to the powerless.

Where are you in that invitation, what's your need to respond?

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Paul, in his letter to the Christians at Corinth has another aspect to his invitations. Compelled by the love of God within him, he adapts himself to the needs of each group he encounters. Keeping his bearings in Christ, he enters their world and tries to experience things from their point of view. He makes himself every sort of servant to lead others into a life-saving and life changing encounter with God!

Pause and think about the people who've brought you into encounters with God. Was it their way of life that challenged you? That inspired you? Was it a timely word of encouragement? Something that made you see life a different way? Who has said or done something that has placed you in a position to trust to God for the first time, or in a new way in your journey of faith?

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And what has been the impact of that on you?

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God speaks to us in our own language. That might be through our culture, our mother tongue, through others who have shared a painful or joyful life experience similar to ours. He meets us where we are and leads us on. He doesn't demand we change and do things for Him before he'll accept us.

That's how Jesus met the people who came to him – and those to whom he went.

³⁰Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once.

³¹He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.”

A simple encounter. She was ill in bed, burning up with a fever – something that could be life-threatening in those days. Jesus simply went to her, didn't apparently even pray or say anything to her. He met her need through touch, taking her by the hand and raising her up – healthy and restored to her normal abilities. No fussing around for this lady – she began to work to meet their needs with a meal.

Just an aside. There's nothing in any of the Gospels to indicate this, but I wonder what Jesus' healing of his mother-in-law meant for the ministry that Simon Peter was to have in being one of Jesus' itinerant disciples. Did this good woman help with the running of the household while he was away? Whatever the case with that, we do know that her response to Jesus's healing was to act!

And that was greatly needed, because as soon as sunset came, the sick and needy came to have their needs met by their own encounter with Jesus, taking his time and his energy to bring the Kingdom of God into their lives, healing the sick and releasing those whose lives were subject to powers they couldn't control.

Each one of those people had their own encounter with the Living God.

And then Jesus created space for his own encounter of love with His Father. He slept and took his rest, then in the early morning, in the dark of the dawn watch, he went out to a deserted place to pray, seeking the encounter with God that Isaiah calls us to.

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³¹ but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
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Today is the 3rd Sunday before Lent. This a time when we can begin to focus on the time we set aside during Lent to seek deeper encounters with God.

What are your heart's desires? What encounters do you have to drawn on? How do you want to encounter the Living Lord more? What's stirring within you? What do you want to be free from?

Maybe you want to fast? Maybe you want to enlarge your horizons? Maybe you want to experience peace within? Find God's strength in your life?

This is the time to be thinking about how you will approach Ash Wednesday and the following weeks of Lent, and the time to talk to Simon the vicar, or to Anna or me, if you want some guidance in that.

Let us each open our hearts and minds to new encounters with the Living Lord! Amen.