

## The Third Sunday of Lent – Part 8

Throughout Lent the Catechumens, candidates, and all of us, are being taught and guided by the proclaimed Word of God. The Scriptures scrutinizes us, challenge us, and comfort us. In addition to the readings, in a more formal way, those being initiated through the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) process will be scrutinized at one of the Sunday Masses during the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent. Some parishes will have these scrutinies ritualized at one Sunday Mass, usually the most well attended. Other parishes will move the RCIA ritual around to various Masses (instead of one set Mass time). By moving it to various Masses (times), a wider variety of parishioners will be exposed to those being baptized and joining the church as well as to the scrutinies themselves.

At the Sunday Mass whenever those in the RCIA process are present and the scrutinies ritualized, year "A" readings should be proclaimed. These readings emphasize conversion and were chosen specifically for the RCIA. The scrutiny, intercessions, and exorcism prayers have been formulated to coincide well with the theme of these readings.

Letting the Word of God inspire and instruct us will lead to us having the best Lent ever. There is a three year cycle of readings. In addition to year "A," there are readings for "B" and "C" which will be addressed in Part 9 for "B," and in Part 10 for "C."

By the third week of Lent, the initial enthusiasm of Lent has waned in the hearts of many. We find that the original urgency of receiving ashes and hearing Jesus' breathless proclamation of "Repent, for the Kingdom is at hand!" has subsided. Our hope for change has not happened so quickly. Life goes on as normal. All the distractions in our lives tend to wear us down and water our original intentions and resolutions.

Personal change is not so easy to come by. It may be that you have not seen any movement in what you are hoping will change. Perhaps there has not been much consolation in prayer. The readings are easily forgotten. Many feel dry and in a desert. Some may even be disheartened. Attendance has dropped; reality has set in. For many, Lent is not what they thought it was going to be. Our goal is to rekindle a sense of urgency and hope. With God all things are possible, and the best is always to come.

Lent is a long period with several ups and downs. The highest "up" may come later in Lent than earlier.

What we need to know is that at any one point in the Lenten process there can be a breakthrough. These sudden movements can occur at the beginning, middle, or even the end of Lent. God's grace and manifestations are mysterious and not always according to our timetables. What God requires is our faithfulness and endurance.

The readings in Year "A" are geared towards ongoing conversion. Remember the purpose of Lent is purification and enlightenment. Conversion happens on many levels – morally, attitudinally, mentally, outreach-wise, and spiritually. The readings will guide us and deepen us in our endeavor to have our best Lent ever.

### From Sir to Savior – Third Sunday of Lent "A"

The gospel of year "A" can be proclaimed in any year in Lent. This selection from John's Gospel is always proclaimed whenever those participating in the RCIA are present.

In the Gospel of (John 4:5–42), Jesus is thirsty. What the Catholic Catechism (#2560) teaches us about prayer is this, that prayer is not only our thirst for God, but it is also the intercession of our thirst for God and with God's thirst for us. Jesus is thirsty for water, yes, but also thirsts for our souls, for our salvation. In God's sight, according to Cardinal O'Connor of New York, our soul has dazzling value.

Jesus is thirsty, but not just for water. Suddenly, a scandalous encounter occurs. A Samaritan woman comes to the well to draw water and meets Jesus. Samaritans were at odds with the Jews about where to worship God and, because of a contentious history, did not get along. Apart from race, there was also the gender problem. Women in the Semitic culture were viewed as second-class citizens and on the periphery of society. If these facts were not enough, we come to find out the woman had been divorced five times and was living in sin. She was politically incorrect, marginalized, and living in sin. Yet, Jesus pushes the boundaries and reaches out to her.

This story tells us that no one is excluded from the sphere of God's grace. Many believe they are not worthy of receiving anything from God because they are sinners or have broken their Lenten resolutions or because of their imperfect past. This Gospel story tells us, that no matter who we are or what we have done, grace is available to us. No one is worthy, but all are welcome.

What Jesus was offering this woman is exactly what we all long for – living water. Remember, the Spirit is the soul of Lent. This reading harmonizes with the Gospel from week one. It was the Spirit who thrust Jesus into the desert. It is God's Spirit who can revolutionize our Lent.

Water in Israel is scarce and valuable. Water quenches thirst and brings growth. Water cleanses and heals. Living water is water that flows and moves. Jesus used the metaphor of water for the person of the Holy Spirit. What Jesus was offering this sinful woman was abundance and newness.

Tradition has it that the woman at the well had a name, Photiri, which means illumination or light. Remember, Lent is about enlightenment. The heart of illumination and enlightenment is God himself. "My heart is athirst for God." (Psalm 42:2). Here we come to understand that David longed and yearned for God. We have all experienced hunger and thirst for God. Deep down this God-craving is our basic instinct.

This woman was illumined through coming to know who Jesus really is. Jesus' identity is the great concern of the four Gospels. This knowledge about Jesus is one way the story relates to the RCIA process. The elect and candidates will profess their faith in Jesus as the Son of God.

Notice that the woman starts out by calling Jesus "Sir." Then, as she converses with him and listens to his words, she calls him a "prophet." This level of faith continues until she listens even more. Eventually, her faith in Jesus grew to the point where she evangelizes her whole town, and they come to believe that he is the Savior of the world. She progressed from "Sir to Savior." People joining the RCIA process may begin about thinking of Jesus is a special or good man, which is the common conception. As they progress through the RCIA process and listen to Jesus, hopefully, they will come to know Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah, and their personal savior. As Paul wrote: "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." (Romans 10:9).

What the Church proclaims is definitive. Jesus is not just a good man, teacher, or even just a prophet. He was not born simply to make us better, or, more virtuous people. Jesus is the Son of God and Savior. He is the divine Word of God incarnate who came to save us from sin and death so we might live forever. The meaning of his name (Savior) expresses the purpose of his mission.

Christianity is about many things, but primarily about receiving eternal life, the salvation of our souls! Salvation is the purpose of the Gospels, the reason for the Church, and the meaning of the priesthood. Eternal life through Jesus is the truth the RCIA participants and we need to believe in and receive.

Humanity has personally experienced the grace of having their sins forgiven when Jesus died on the cross on our behalf. Jesus tasted death in order that we may live. The seal, or guarantee of this fact is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the "down payment," the guarantee of what is yet to come. (Ephesians 1:14).

Along with salvation, one can experience a radical change through God's Spirit of love. The Holy Spirit is God himself who lives in us. In the fifth week of Lent, part 14, we will be introduced to a theological concept called "realized eschatology." In a nutshell: Eternal life begins now, when we experience and develop a relationship with God the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the love of God poured out into our hearts. This Gospel reading begins the formal scrutiny of the RCIA participants because it is critically important that they come to know the Holy Spirit in their spiritual lives. Jesus said: "Whoever thirsts, come to me and drink." (John 7:37).

When it comes to the RCIA process, we are helping the inquirers to join a religion, yes, but so much more. Our goal for those who want to join Catholicism is to know the truth that a personal relationship with God is possible. Through this relationship, salvation occurs and eternal life begins. These are critical monumental truths of our faith. As Lord and giver of life, God's Spirit is available to us and thirsts for us. A deep relationship with God is true enlightenment and illumination. The Spirit is also instrumental in the purgative process of purification.

After the third Sunday of Lent the elect will be presented with the Creed. In the Creed, we learn the Holy Spirit is Lord, God himself. We are all invited to believe in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Here is what our ancient Creed states about God's Spirit:

"I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,  
who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified,  
who has spoken through the prophets."

The Holy Spirit is the soul of the Church. The Spirit comes to revolutionize our life and give us rebirth. Eternal life begins as we relate to God's Spirit.

During the Mass, the elect and candidates are scrutinized. The exorcism prayer during the first scrutiny is for the elect, the candidates, and for all of us. Here is an excerpt of the prayer:

"Lord Jesus, you are the fountain for which they thirst, you are the Master whom they seek. In your love free them from their infirmities, heal their sickness, quench their thirst, and give them peace. In the power of your name, which we call upon in faith, stand by them now and heal them. Rule over that spirit of evil, conquered by your rising from the dead. Show your Elect the way of salvation in the Holy Spirit, that they may come to worship the Father. Amen."

The same Holy Spirit who thrust Jesus into the desert is now available to us. God's Spirit is living water that refreshes us and quenches our thirst. Through the Spirit we are purified and illumined. As we develop a personal relationship with God, we receive eternal life even now.

## Lenten Lessons:

- God Spirit is available to all
- The Holy Spirit comes to purify and enlighten us
- The Spirit illumines us about who Jesus is
- Eternal life begins now through our relationship with God

## Lenten Action:

- Read a book or watch a video about the Holy Spirit

## Presentation of the Creed

Since ancient times, the creed has been presented to the elect either before Lent or during the week after the third Sunday of Lent. The creed may be the "Nicene Creed" or the shorter "Apostles Creed" or both. Usually the statement's of faith is presented verbally (in the context of Mass or a Word service) but can also be given as a document. The candidates, (as distinct from the elect), will not be given the creed unless it is understood that they need further catechesis in this area. The creed should be memorized and both the elect and candidates will recite the creed publicly before the Vigil Easter service begins. The creed and the "Our Father" prayers (which will be presented after the fifth Sunday of Lent) have always been regarded as expressing the heart of the Church's faith and prayer.

The shorter and older "Apostle's Creed" is Trinitarian in form. It does not address the Christological issues that came about later in the "Nicene Creed." We first hear about the "Apostle's Creed" in a letter from a synod in Milan about the year 390. It was thought that the apostles themselves contributed to this Creed. This form of the Creed may be professed, especially during Sunday's and Solemnities in Lent and the Easter season.

The "Nicene Creed" comes from the first Council of Nicaea (modern-day Turkey) in 325. It was updated in 381 at the Council of Constantinople. The New Missal of the Catholic Mass changed it even further in 2013. One of the main changes was to personalize our faith. Instead of saying, "We believe," we now say, "I believe."

Personalizing the Creed is a monumental change. Our faith is not just something handed on to us or given to us by our parents. Believing is a personal assent we must choose for ourselves over and over again. Faith is something deeply personal, and we are solely responsible for what we choose to believe. We will be saved by our faith in Christ and judged by what we choose to believe in life. Although we belong to a community (we) of faith, the bottom line is: what do you believe? On Judgment Day, I won't be scrutinized for your beliefs and deeds, but evaluated on what I believe and what I have done. Deeds reveal faith, and that is why the books will be opened and we will be judged according to our works. (See Revelations 20:22).

Also, in the changes, theological words such as consubstantial (of one substance or essence) and incarnate (in human form) were used. These lofty words are packed with meaning and reflect much theological debate throughout the ages. The Creed contains the foundational truths which we assent to.

The profession of the Creed is a great place to start: I believe in God. I believe in Jesus Christ. I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the one holy Catholic and apostolic Church. However, the faith expressed in the Bible is so much more than stating words or a simple assent. We must progress beyond simply believing that God is. Scripture says even the demons believe and tremble. (James 2:19).

Mature faith means more than just deciding to believe that God exists. We not only believe that God is, but that God is good, has our best interest in mind, and is at work in our life. We not only believe that Jesus was real, but that he is risen and can save us. We do not simply believe the Holy Spirit is true, but that the Spirit lives within us and brings eternal life.

Faith in God is a whole new way of seeing the world and gives us a completely new perspective. It is like wearing new glasses that brings the world into sharp focus. Paul wrote: "We walk by faith and not by 'sight.'" (2 Corinthians 5:7). When we look at the world, we do not see the universe as a result of some theoretic "big bang," but as an intelligent design formed by an omniscient, omnipotent God. If there was a big bang, it was caused by God. We do not just look at a crucifix as a decorative religious symbol but as the means of our personal salvation. Through faith, our lives are not arbitrary and without meaning but full of purpose and hope. Believing in God brings rebirth and a personal relationship with God. Faith gives us the ability to conquer mountains, achieved dreams, and recover from addictions. Most importantly, our faith in Jesus bring salvation. We are saved by grace through our faith. (Ephesians 2:8). It is our faith in God and his power that opens the door for God to work.

Faith is a gift that God bestows on us. Which comes first, our assent or the gift? Paul makes that clear when he states faith is not our doing but is the gift of God. (Ephesians 2:8). Those who are joining the Church as well as we, the baptized, must recognize the primacy of grace. We believe because God has gifted us to have faith. **Count your blessings. There are multitudes who do not believe.**

We cannot earn faith; we do not deserve it and can never merit it. Faith is a gift of inestimable value and immeasurable worth. How can you measure having something real and intimate with God? Believing in God opens our hearts to intimacy. What value can you put on living with God forever in the glorious delights of Paradise? Yes, that is exactly what faith will bring. What price can you put of realizing our potential and being given the ability to achieve our dreams? This, too, is the byproduct of believing. In Hebrews, Chapter 11, we see that people such as Abraham, Moses, David, Sampson, as well as all the prophets, lived by faith in God and received great power to live astonishing lives.

Jesus taught us that faith can grow. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus would often refer to his disciples as those with "little faith." He taught them if they had faith the size of a mustard seed, they could move mountains and nothing would be impossible to them." (Matthew 17:20–21). Mustard seeds are the tiniest of seeds, but can grow to be large plants. Jesus was telling us that it is the same with faith. Faith begins small with a simple willingness, a decision to believe that God is true. It progresses into believing that not only is God true, but God is good, forgiving, and at work in our lives. Because of faith in God, mountains, challenges, and obstacles in life can be overcome. Long-standing trees of addictions, bad habits, emotional dysfunction, and negativity can be uprooted.

Faith in God progresses when it turns into trust. To trust someone means you believe in their character as trustworthy, so much so, that you lean upon them, depend on them, and rely on that person. God has proven time and time again that we can completely trust him. We even placed that sentiment on our money.

God surrounds us with his love and is infinitely able to help us. Paul wrote: "God is able to do more than we can ever dare to ask, think, or imagine." (Ephesians 3:20). Because of God's almighty power and impeccable character, we can "lean on the everlasting arms" and expect help in our time of need. What the risen Jesus told St. Faustina to write under his portrait is a message for our generation: "Jesus I trust in you." Pray this simple prayer as often as you can.

Faith continues to grow when it moves beyond confident assent, and, action is the completion of faith. To get a complete picture of faith, we must understand that faith without works is dead. (James 2:26). When James discussed Abraham, (our father of faith), he wrote: "Faith was active along with his works and faith was completed by works." (James 2:22). These are not the works of the law, but, the works of faith he was discussing. Faith always requires action. Our lives are not lived in an experimental vacuum. We cannot just assent to someone without living out that assent. We live in the real world, full of problems and challenges which requires real faith. Authentic faith is like two sides of the same coin: confidence in God, along with, the deeds that express that certainty.

Faith is so vitally important that it must be more than mere assent. To activate faith, we must speak it out of our mouths. The Creed helps us with this but so do our own words. "Jesus, I trust in you. Jesus, I believe you make all things work for our good." Along with words, make sure you do what your faith requires. "Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith." (James 2:18). Our deeds are critical and are the flipside of faith.

The elect and candidates, as well as we believers, are all on a pilgrimage of faith. Through listening to the Word (faith comes by hearing), facing our challenges, and getting actively involved, our faith grows. Our faith in God is pregnant with works that brings salvation. Three things will last forever, and one of them is faith in God. The reason we give the elect and candidates the Creed is so that they will know the faith of the church. This creed is not so much to be memorized and spoken as to be believed in and lived.

#### Lenten Lessons:

- Thank God for the gift of your faith
- We are saved by grace through faith
- Trust God in every circumstance
- Belief and action go together

#### Lenten Action:

- Pay attention to each word when you pray the Creed at Mass

