

LENT SUN 03-C – (Homily 02)

“Called To Repent”

(Exodus 3:1-8a, 13-15; Psalm 103; 1 Cor 19:1-6, 10-12; Lk 13:1-9)

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Cardinal John Henry Newman, who is soon to be beatified in England, once said that to live is to change, and to have lived well is to have changed much.

“Unless we repent we will perish as they did.” These stark words from Jesus in today’s gospel are a strong message to us to change, to repent. The other readings lead up to and affirm this message.

In the first reading, Moses leads his flock beyond the wilderness to Mount Horeb. This subtle note and the need to go to such out of the ordinary measures to pasture his flock may indicate a certain wildness, a daring, a radical streak in Moses, or perhaps just a desperate need to find food for his flock. Either way, it portrays him as a person used to crossing borders and sets him up for a mystical encounter with God, past the wilderness, on the mountain.

In that encounter of the burning bush, he finds himself meeting his creator, the God he did not know by name, who identifies himself as the God of his ancestors. That would be the most likely point of encounter for one who was probably surrounded by a people immersed in a natural religion based on the veneration of ancestors, as are many indigenous religions.

But then this mysterious deity goes one step further to identify God’s self as the one who just is. In Greek, the words are *Ego Eimi* and they mean precisely, the one who is, I Am. But this God does not stop there. God goes on to identify God’s self with those who suffer, with the oppressed Hebrews from which Moses came. Here we see already inklings of a God that begins to sound like the one we believe is the Son of God, who used the same words to describe himself, and who was the suffering servant.

The psalm for its part is a beautiful, highly developed Old Testament description of the God that Jesus would embody in the flesh: “It is the Lord who forgives all your iniquity, heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, and crowns you with steadfast love and mercy.” It goes on to add that “the Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in

steadfast love.” What a powerful preparation, thousands of years before he would come in the flesh, for the one who would most fully embody these words.

We then move on to the second reading where Paul asserts that we must be much more open than were the Chosen People of the Old Testament, who were liberated from physical oppression and slavery in Egypt, but who never really understood that freedom was to lead to an inner relationship of love with a living God.

Paul then connects the spiritual rock from which Moses and that wandering tribe drank in the desert, with Christ – “And the rock was Christ,” is how St. Paul puts it. We are now more ready to be open, like Moses, to the teachings of God, not through a burning bush, but through Jesus Christ.

And teach Jesus does, in the gospel for today. His message is crystal clear, and one we dare not take lightly. We must repent, or we will perish just as surely as the unfortunate souls who met with political oppression or accidental death or an earthquake like in Haiti. There is no judgment nor blame here – just the unswerving message of the importance of repentance.

So we must explore more deeply what is involved in repentance. If that is the key to receiving the reign of God that Jesus came to inaugurate, it merits our full attention. We know that the word “repent” comes from the Greek word *metanoia*, which means to turn around and to live out of our higher, more noble mind. Why such an insistence on this reality, however?

I suspect because repentance is one of the more difficult things that we stubborn and sinful human beings will ever do. There is a great deal of fear in our lives, and fear of the truth, fear of the unknown and fear of change, is part of that mix. Many if not most people automatically resist painful self awareness and resist their need to change anything about themselves.

The awareness wheel which describes our human nature and how we operate as human beings holds the key to repentance. Our human needs leads to belief systems, which in turn leads to emotions, which in turn influences our actions and behaviour. To repent, to grow, to heal, we must stop any hurtful actions, learn to deal with our painful emotions, perhaps change our belief systems if necessary, and finally learn how to have our needs met in positive ways. This is a recipe for change, growth, for repentance.

Genuine repentance begins with self awareness. That in itself is a great challenge for most people. We prefer to live in blame and denial, and remain stuck in our present rut, some so much so that they think it is a groove!

Often we project onto other people what we refuse to see in ourselves. Or we rationalize and justify and blame and minimize. The end result is that we don't grow, and can cause needless pain and hurt to others we love, and even to ourselves.

Elizabeth Kubler Ross wrote a book on death and dying in which she describes five stages that people go through when they are told that they have a terminal illness. Those five stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance. Strikingly enough, anyone who genuinely repents of a defect of character they are made aware of will probably go through those same stages.

Two young priests, both involved in Marriage Encounter, Albert and Ray, were trying to co-pastor a parish. After a meeting at a hospital about pastoral care, Albert could see that Ray was visibly upset. He suggested that they dialogue as is done in Marriage Encounter. When he read that Ray felt upset and controlled in that at the meeting they had, no matter what he said, the people would do what Albert wanted anyway, Albert for the first time in his life learned that he unconsciously had a tendency to control, to give off the impression that he was in charge.

Fortunately, he was reading a book by John Powell at that time that happened to mention that the stages of dying taught by Kubler-Ross also apply to us on a spiritual level. He could immediately identify what was happening to him and go on a healing journey of his tendency to control. He had experienced a moment of genuine repentance. He had lived the gospel for this Sunday.

St. Paul, in the second reading again, is like a dog with a bone. He is not about to let us off the hook. After identifying the rock as Christ, he warns us not to take repentance for granted. "These things happened to the Chosen people in the desert to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the end of the ages has come," St. Paul tells us. Then he gives us one last warning and incentive to take action: "So if you think that you are standing, watch out that you do not fall."

That means for us simply, do not take Jesus and his teaching for granted, but act on that teaching and repent from the depths of our beings, so that we might enter the reign of God and walk with the Lord in a new way of life. And that is what this Sunday of Lent is all about.

The Eucharist that we celebrate is always an invitation to repent, to receive God's forgiveness and healing, and to walk more closely with our God.

So remember, this third Sunday of Lent, we are invited to repent from the depths of our being to be able to live life to the full.