

## Bishop Bradley's Reflections on the Sunday Readings

March 13, 2016 Fifth Sunday of Lent

Even though spring is still one week away, these past few days have made everyone begin to think that it's already here. The temperatures have been comfortable, the snow banks have pretty much disappeared, and even today's steady, soft rain feels spring-like. These post-winter days which let us know we're in for the new and life-giving season of spring are somewhat reflective of the main message we have heard in the Scripture Readings on this Fifth Sunday of Lent.

In today's First Reading, we heard the Prophet Isaiah tell us: "*Remember not the things of the past---the things of long ago, consider not. See, I am doing something new....*"

In today's Second Reading from St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians, he beautifully wrote: "*I consider everything else as loss...as rubbish....except for my relationship with Christ.*" That's quite a statement! Then he goes on: "*It's not that I am there yet....but I forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead....I continue my pursuit toward the goal: the prize of God's upward calling in Christ Jesus.*"

Finally, in today's passage from St. John's Gospel, we heard the account of the nameless woman caught in the sinful/unlawful act of adultery. The scribes and pharisees truly didn't care anything about the woman; they simply wanted to use her misfortunate and embarrassing situation to set a trap for Jesus. They were convinced that they had really boxed Jesus into a corner as they were convinced they had him in a "no-win situation". But of course Jesus didn't fall into their trap. He just paused, thought, doodled on the ground, and then He made this simply brilliant statement: *Let the one among you who is without sin be the first one to throw a stone.*" One by one, they walked away, leaving just the woman standing there. St. Augustine, our diocesan patron, in his reflection on this scene, wrote: "there were two left: Misery (the woman) and Mercy (Jesus)." Isn't that beautiful?

In the midst of this Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy, today's Gospel passage focuses on that divine gift in a way that I hope we can all understand. As we all know, misery is what we experience after we realize that we have sinned---when we turn away from God---when we choose to go off in a different direction than the direction God lays out for us. This entire

Season of Lent has been focused on that very point. During this season, and by means of the many Lenten resolutions that we have made, we are trying to convert our hearts and minds---to renew our relationship with God---to deepen our faith in God; in other words, to start “anew”, just like Isaiah told us God wants to do within us all the time. What Jesus offered the woman in today’s Gospel story who was certainly *miser-able* is something that every one of us longs for: to be loved unconditionally, in spite of our sins and failings. Jesus gave her a “new beginning”-- -a second chance---a “springtime” and a whole new lease on life. Jesus showed “Misery” the longed-for “Mercy”.

As Pope Francis said in his Angelus address for this Fifth Sunday of Lent: “On this Fifth Sunday of Lent, the Gospel presents us with the story of the adulterous woman whom Jesus saves from being condemned to death. It captures Jesus’ attitude: we do not hear words of contempt, we do not hear words of condemnation, but only words of love, of mercy, that invite us to conversion. *‘Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more!’*. Well, brothers and sisters, God’s face is that of a merciful father who is always patient. Have you thought about God’s patience, the patience that He has with each of us? That is His mercy. He always has patience, is always patient with us, understanding us, awaiting us, never tiring of forgiving us if we know how to return to Him with a contrite heart. *‘Great is the Lord’s mercy’*, says the Psalm.” Our God brushes away our “misery” and replaces it with His “mercy”----His unconditional love.

Every time we come together for Mass, we begin with the reminder that we are all sinners and that we seek God’s mercy. Right before we receive Holy Communion, we pray the beautiful prayer of true humility: “Lord I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof; but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.” During this Season of Lent, as we focus more on the misery that results from our sinful choices, it is the perfect time to consider turning to the Lord to ask for His Mercy by receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation---by making a good confession. It is through that beautiful sacrament that we know with certainty that we will receive God’s forgiveness and His wonderful gift of mercy.

The woman in today’s Gospel found out that she could walk away from that encounter and leave her sinful past behind her. She found out that Jesus believed in her, loved her unconditionally, and though He didn’t justify her sin, He saw her as much more than just a sinner---she was a person filled with new possibilities for living a life of love as she renewed her commitment to follow God’s ways. That’s why St. Paul’s prayer today should become our own.

May we all pray, with the same fervor as he had: *“I continue my pursuit in hope of perfect maturity...forgetting what lies behind, but straining forward to what lies ahead...the prize of God’s calling, in Christ Jesus.”*

As we move closer to the beautiful, life-giving season of Spring, and as we enter into these final two weeks of Lent, let us all take comfort in those beautiful words of Jesus, spoken to the woman in today’s Gospel, and that He longs to say to each of us as well: *“Neither do I condemn you...Go, and from now on, do not sin any more.”*

God bless you, now and always.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

+ Bishop Paul J. Bradley