

DEUTERONOMY 26:1-11 AND ROMANS 5:5-13 “Take Up Your Cross of First Fruits”

TODAY IS THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT. THIS YEAR OUR JOURNEY WILL REFLECT ON JESUS’ WORDS FROM **LUKE 9:23**-“WHOEVER WANTS TO BE MY DISCIPLE MUST DAILY, TAKE UP THEIR CROSS AND FOLLOW ME.”

ON ASH WEDNESDAY WE MEDITATED ON THE PUZZLE OF THE CROSS, THE FIRST PIECE OF WHICH IS GOD, WHO IS AT THE TOP. MAN AND WOMAN ARE AT THE BOTTOM, WITH SIN ABOVE THEM. IN BETWEEN IS JESUS, HE COMPLETES THE CROSS FROM TOP TO BOTTOM, AS THE CENTER PIECE OF BOTH THE HORIZONTAL AND VERTICAL PARTS OF THE CROSS. THE CROSS BEAM CONSISTS OF SACRIFICE ON ONE SIDE WITH –JESUS IN THE MIDDLE. AND ON THE OTHER SIDE IS SALVATION, BECAUSE THROUGH HIS SACRIFICE HE HAS SAVED US.

THIS IS ONE REASON WHY LENT IS A GOOD TIME TO REFLECT ON WHAT IT MEANS TO TAKE UP OUR OWN CROSS. AFTER ALL, WE HEAR THIS CALL FROM TIME TO TIME, BUT DO NOT OFTEN LOOK DEEP INTO WHAT IT MEANS FOR US.

TODAY’S SCRIPTURE READINGS OFFER TWO DEVOTIONAL ACTS THAT CAN BE SPIRITUALLY INSPIRING AND HELPFUL IN THESE MANY WEEKS LEADING UP TO EASTER, AND EVEN BEYOND.

THE FIRST INVOLVES A PERSONAL CONFESSION OF FAITH, AND THE SECOND IS AN OFFERING OF OUR BEST TO GOD. IT IS THIS SECOND THAT WE WILL LOOK AT MORE CLOSELY, SINCE IT IS OFTEN THE MORE CHALLENGING OF THE TWO.

THE OLD TESTAMENT READING REVOLVES AROUND GOD’S COMMANDS TO HIS PEOPLE AFTER THEY HAVE ENTERED THE PROMISED LAND. BUT NOTICE, THE OFFERING TO GOD GOES BEYOND GRATITUDE FOR THE GIFT OF THE PROMISED LAND.

GOD INSTRUCTS HIS PEOPLE SAYING, THEY ARE TO REMEMBER AND BE THANKFUL FOR THE LORD’S UNFAILING FAITHFULNESS TO THEM. THE REQUIRED DECLARATION: “A WANDERING ARAMEAN WAS MY FATHER” - IS ACTUALLY A REFERENCE TO JACOB.

THE BOOK GENESIS TELLS HOW, AT PHARAOH’S WORD- JOSEPH BROUGHT HIS FATHER JACOB, ALONG WITH THE REST OF THE EXTENDED FAMILY INTO LAND OF EGYPT, TO SAVE THEM FROM FAMINE. THEY AND THEIR DESCENDANTS FIRST LIVED THERE AS INVITED GUESTS; BUT LATER- UNDER A DIFFERENT RULER, THE PEOPLE OF GOD BECAME SLAVES.

AS WE KNOW FROM SCRIPTURE, GOD EVENTUALLY ACTED TO BRING HIS PEOPLE OUT OF SLAVERY. HOWEVER BECAUSE THEY SINNED AGAINST THE LORD, THEY WANDERED IN THE WILDERNESS FOR 40 YEARS - UNTIL GOD ALLOWED THEIR CHILDREN TO TAKE POSSESSION OF THE PROMISED LAND.

THUS, ONCE THEY POSSESSED THE LAND, THE PEOPLE WERE INSTRUCTED TO MAKE OFFERINGS TO GOD. THE HARVEST OFFERING WAS INTENDED TO BE AN EXPRESSION OF THEIR TRUST IN GOD, AS WELL AS AN EXPRESSION OF THANKSGIVING.

BUT THE FAITH CREED THE ISRAELITES WERE COMMANDED TO SAY WHEN THEY MADE THEIR OFFERING WAS MUCH MORE THAN A RECITATION OF WHAT GOD ONCE DID FOR THEM. IT WAS ALSO AN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT THAT THE GOD WHO BROUGHT THEM OUT OF SLAVERY, THROUGH THE DESERT, AND INTO THE LAND OF MILK AND HONEY- REMAINS WITH THEM.

**DEUTERONOMY 26** INSTRUCTS THOSE WHOM GOD HAS DELIVERED TO RESPOND WITH-AN OFFERING OF THE FIRST FRUIT OF THE LAND THEY HAVE BEEN GIVEN. THIS OFFERING IS COUPLED WITH A VERBAL ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR THEM. THE REQUIREMENT SPELLED OUT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT READING ACTUALLY SERVES AS REMINDER TO GOD’S PEOPLE OF THEIR SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LORD.

HERE IS HOW ONE BIBLICAL SCHOLAR PUT IT: “EVERY HARVEST IS A NEW BEGINNING FOR THE ISRAELITES, A TIME TO GET BACK TO BASICS, TO CORRECT ERRORS AND WANDERINGS FROM...THE LORD.”

AND WHILE GOD IS AVAILABLE TO RECEIVE US AT ANY TIME, LENT PROVIDES US WITH A SIMILAR OPPORTUNITY. INDEED IT CALLS US TO RENEW OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LORD- WHO IS OUR SAVIOR AND GOD.

WE TAKE UP OUR CROSS OF FIRST FRUITS BY FINDING WHAT IS THE MOST DIFFICULT THING FOR US TO GIVE FIRST TO GOD. IS IT TIME, MONEY, OUR SKILLS AND TALENTS, OR OUR LOVE? TRY DURING LENT TO OFFER FIRST TO GOD THAT WHICH IS THE HARDEST, AND THUS IS SACRIFICIAL.

WE MAY LEARN AFTER GIVING THAT FIRST TO THE LORD, OUR OTHER FIRST FRUITS WILL MORE EASILY FOLLOW. BUT OUR OFFERING BEGINS BY REFLECTING ON WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR US.

TODAY'S EPISTLE READING SERVES AS A REMINDER ABOUT THE MAIN REASON WE HAVE TO BE GRATEFUL. IT IS FOR THE GRACE OF GOD, WHICH WE RECEIVE THROUGH FAITH IN HIS SON.

INDEED, THE READING FROM ROMANS 10 IS A CONFESSION OF FAITH THAT GOD REDEEMS US AND ADOPTS US INTO HIS FAMILY, THROUGH JESUS. THE PASSAGE FROM ROMANS REMINDS US ABOUT THE WONDER OF CHRIST'S SACRIFICE. AND IT PROCLAIMS THE MIRACLE THE CROSS AND EMPTY TOMB PROVIDE FOR THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN HIM.

THE TEXT REMINDS US TO CALL UPON THE NAME OF THE LORD. ONE WAY TO DO THIS IS TO GIVE GOD THE FIRST FRUITS OF OUR WEEK IN WORSHIP. FOR EVEN WHEN WE DO NOT MAKE IT TO CHURCH, WE CAN AND SHOULD CALL UPON THE NAME OF THE LORD, THROUGH PRAYER AND PRAISE.

REMEMBER-DEUTERONOMY 26 TEACHES US TO SHOW GRATITUDE TO GOD FOR CHRIST, BY GIVING BACK OUR FIRST FRUITS. THIS IS SACRIFICIAL BECAUSE GIVING GOD THE FIRST PORTION OF OUR DAY ESPECIALLY WHEN WE ARE NOT IN A PLACE OF WORSHIP IS NOT EASY FOR MOST OF US.

THEN THERE ARE VARIOUS OTHER OF THE FIRST FRUITS WE ARE CHALLENGED TO OFFER TO GOD ALSO. AS FAR AS TIME GOES- IT CAN BE HARD, ESPECIALLY FOR THOSE WHO ARE NOT "MORNING PEOPLE" TO PAUSE TO GREET GOD IN THE MORNING, WHEN WE MUST RUSH OFF TO OUR MORNING DUTIES.

FURTHERMORE, GIVING THE FRUITS OF OUR OTHER RESOURCES, INCLUDING MONEY IS ALSO NOT EASY FOR MANY OF US, WHEN THERE ARE BILLS TO PAY AND FOOD TO BUY. THUS IT IS EVIDENT THAT THE TWO SCRIPTURE PASSAGES WE HEARD THIS MORNING EASILY GO HAND-IN-HAND.

BOTH READINGS ARE ABOUT REMEMBERING WHOSE WE ARE, ABOUT, TAKING GOD'S SIDE, AND ABOUT CHOOSING TO PUT OUR TRUST IN THE LORD, AND IN HIS PROMISES. PAUL'S WRITING TO THE ROMAN CHURCH ABOUT EXPRESSING FAITH IN JESUS AS SAVIOR CAN BE SEEN AS THE CULMINATION OF THE DEUTERONOMY TEACHING.

AFTER ALL, THE LORD CHOSE ABRAHAM AND SARAH AND THEIR DESCENDANTS TO BE HIS PEOPLE, BEFORE THEY CHOSE THE LORD TO BE THEIR GOD. TRULY, GOD'S REDEMPTION OF THE JEWS AND GENTILES ALIKE IS THE FULFILLMENT OF THE GRACE FIRST GIVEN TO HEBREW PEOPLE ALONE.

IN FACT- PAUL, IN HIS LETTER, REMINDS CHRISTIANS THAT THEIR EFFORTS DID NOT BRING JESUS TO EARTH AT HIS BIRTH- NOR CAN THEY BRING ABOUT HIS SECOND COMING. LIKewise THEY DID NOT RAISE JESUS FROM THE DEAD, BUT ALL THOSE THINGS WERE DONE BY GOD'S WILL AND POWER ALONE.

**EPHESIANS 2:8-9**- PROVIDES A GOOD SUMMARY OF GOD'S SAVING ACTIONS IN BOTH THE OLD AND THE NEW TESTAMENTS, SAYING: "FOR BY GRACE YOU HAVE BEEN SAVED BY FAITH, AND THIS IS NOT YOUR OWN DOING; IT IS THE GIFT OF GOD- NOT THE RESULT OF WORKS, SO NO ONE MAY BOAST."

LENT IS INDEED A TIME WE ARE ESPECIALLY ENCOURAGED TO RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO BOAST ABOUT OUR GOOD DEEDS OR FAITHFULNESS TO GOD. INSTEAD, LIKE WITH THE JEWS AFTER THE HARVEST, LENT IS A TIME FOR US TO REFLECT ON, AND FINDS WAYS TO SHOW OUR GRATITUDE TO GOD, FOR HIS FAITHFULNESS AND GRACE TOWARDS US.

THERE IS A PORTRAIT, I READ ABOUT, LOCATED IN A CHURCH IN SWITZERLAND, WHICH MIGHT BE HELPFUL TO ENVISION DURING OUR LENTEN REFLECTIONS. AT FIRST GLANCE THE PAINTING APPEARS TO BE A BEAUTIFULLY DONE, YET ORDINARY DEPICTION OF CHRIST'S CRUCIFIXION. HOWEVER, THOSE WHO LOOK MORE CLOSELY AT THE ARTWORK WILL DISCOVER IN THE BACKGROUND AN EXTRAORDINARY SITE. THE ARTIST DID NOT SIMPLY PAINT THE CROSS THAT HELD CHRIST, PLANTED FIRMLY IN THE SOIL OF CALVARY, AS ONE WOULD EXPECT TO SEE. INSTEAD- FAINTLY IN THE BACKGROUND- TWO LARGE ARMS ARE SHOWN REACHING DOWN FROM HEAVEN- AND THE HANDS OF GOD THE FATHER CAN BE SEEN HOLDING UP THE CROSS.

ONE WAY TO INTERPRET THE SIGHT IS TO VIEW JESUS AS GOD'S GIFT OF THE FIRST FRUITS OF HIS LOVE FOR US. INDEED JESUS IS THE GIFT OF GOD'S OWN SELF- THE BEST HE COULD OFFER TO THE SINFUL CREATURES MADE IN HIS IMAGE.

THE CHRISTIAN CONFESSION OF FAITH IS THAT- JESUS IS GOD AND JESUS IS ALSO ONE OF US. THUS WE COULD ALSO SAY THAT- IN CHRIST, GOD GAVE HIMSELF TO US, AND THROUGH CHRIST WE GIVE OURSELVES TO GOD.

WE CAN GIVE OURSELVES TO GOD BY WHAT WE GIVE TO THE CHURCH, IN OUR WORSHIP AND PRAYER LIFE, AND IN ACTS OF CHARITY AND SERVICE TO OTHERS AS FOLLOWERS OF JESUS. WE KNOW THIS, OF COURSE, BUT WHAT WE MAY FORGET IS IN ORDER FOR THESE OFFERINGS TO BE LIKE TAKING UP THE CROSS, THEY SHOULD BE SACRIFICIAL.

WHAT THIS MEANS IS THAT WE ARE CALLED TO TAKE UP OUR CROSS OF FIRST FRUITS, BY NOT GIVING TO GOD OUR LEFT-OVERS, WHAT WE HAVE TO SPARE. SO OFTEN THAT IS WHAT WE DO, WE TAKE CARE OF OUR NEEDS, AND THEN OUR WANTS, AND THEN IF THERE IS TIME OR MONEY LEFT OVER WE MAY TO GIVE IT TO GOD.

THE CROSS OF FIRST FRUITS CHALLENGES US MAKE GIVING A THANK OFFERING TO GOD OUR TOP PRIORITY. THIS WILL NOT BE EASY FOR MOST CHRISTIANS, AFTER ALL THE CROSS CAN BE HEAVY, OR TROUBLESOME, OR EVEN FOR SOME- INCONVENIENT. THIS IS WHY WE NEED HELP TO CARRY IT, HELP TO REALLY FOLLOW JESUS.

THERE IS A POEM I FOUND ON-LINE THAT PRAYERFULLY EXPRESSES OUR NEED FOR HELP. IT IS CALLED: "CARRY YOUR CROSS", AND WRITTEN BY EILEEN MANASSIAN GHALI. HERE US A PORTION OF IT:

"JESUS...WHEN YOU SAID, "TAKE UP YOUR CROSS, AND FOLLOW ME. WHAT DID YOU MEAN, JESUS? WHAT DID YOU MEAN?..."

WHAT IS THAT CROSS, JESUS? ARE YOU SURE I CAN BEAR IT?  
IS IT THE CROSS OF SELF-DENIAL?  
IT IS MY CRUCIFIED PRIDE? MY UNRULY DESIRES? MY SELF-INDULGENT WILL? MY SELFISH DREAMS?...

REMEMBER, JESUS REMEMBER, LORD...PLEASE, REMEMBER  
THAT I AM WEAK, I'M ONLY HUMAN-FRAGILE, FRAIL,  
DOUBTFUL, AFRAID, MOST OF ALL UNWILLING...

JESUS...I BALK AT THE PAIN I MUST ENDURE, BUT....I KNOW, I KNOW....YOU CAN HELP ME CARRY THIS CROSS.

FOR YOU CARRIED A MUCH BIGGER ONE THAT HAD NAILED ON IT ALL MY INSECURITIES AND PAIN RIGHT ALONG WITH YOUR BLEEDING HANDS-

THAT COVERED THOSE SINS AND WASHED THEM IN RED AND MADE THEM WHITER...MUCH WHITER THAN SNOW.

JESUS...HELP ME BEAR IT. THIS CROSS IS TOO HEAVY FOR MY FRAIL SHOULDERS, PLEASE, HOLD ME IN YOUR EMBRACE SECURE ME...

COVER ME WITH YOUR STRONG ARMS. LET YOUR SHOULDERS BEAR THE WEIGHT ONCE AGAIN....AS YOU CARRY THIS CROSS, MY CROSS FOR ME.

LET US PRAY: