

5th SUNDAY OF LENT -- B (March 29, 2009)
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The first reading today from the prophet Jeremiah is one of most important passages in all the Old Testament, with God's promise to make a new covenant with his people--writing his law within them and on their hearts, promising to be their God and them his people. Those promises, of course, came to their fulfillment and perfection in J who spoke directly of his own role in that new covenant. Remember how J spoke at the Last Supper when he gave us the Eucharist, changing bread into his Body and wine into his Blood, saying 'this cup is the new covenant in my blood'. And as Jeremiah also records for us, God spoke of another aspect of this new covenant in saying "I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more." The forgiveness of sins and the healing of our broken relationship with the Father is precisely what Jesus Christ was and is all about, and he gave us many ways to know and rejoice in that forgiveness--especially in the sacraments, and even more especially in the sacraments of healing. I spoke of the anointing of the sick last weekend; today, I want to speak on the other sacrament of healing--that of reconciliation/confession.

Lent is the time of the Church year more than any other when this sacrament takes on such power. Remembering what Jesus endured for us, remembering his challenge to us to repent and change our ways of sin, selfishness and laziness...no wonder we are encouraged to make use of this sacrament of mercy. It's why we priests dedicate extra time for confessions--here for our grade school and religious education students, at Columbus earlier this month, helping out at each other's parishes, and so on. It's always gratifying to see how many people come to this sacrament during this season and elsewhere. But I also wonder how many people continue to shy away from confession and why they may do so. Maybe because they say they can talk directly to God and ask forgiveness...of course we can always do so, but Jesus explicitly gave us this sacrament (see John 20) and he thus obviously intends for us to make use of it. There can be a host of reasons.

What's your view of this sacrament? That question leads me to ask another--what's your view of God; how do you see him? That's an important question, and a relevant one. If your image of God is one of an angry, vengeful being in the heavens who is just waiting to catch you in sin so as to zap you into eternal fire, you may well run away from confession in despair. Or if you think of God as some infinitely distant, vague spirit who isn't concerned about you in any personal sense, then you may well think 'why bother with confession; why bother with anything?'

Let me offer you a different image of God, one that is founded on Scripture, truth and the way things really are--an image that has been given new life and spirit in our own time. You have all heard, of course, of Mother Teresa of Calcutta--now Blessed Teresa (she has been beatified and will no doubt soon be canonized as a saint). I just finished reading a very powerful book about her, her life in God and how that directed her life's work; it's called "Mother Teresa's Secret Fire" by Fr. Joseph Langford and I recommend it very highly. Just a brief background: at age 18, she joined the Sisters of Loreto and taught for many years in a girls' school in Calcutta (India) and also served the local poor when she wasn't teaching. On September 10, 1946--while on her way to a retreat, she had a very powerful and direct experience of God and what she came to refer to as 'a call within a call' to leave her community and devote herself fulltime to serving the poor in the slums. Thus began her work among the 'poorest of the poor'; others joined her and she eventually founded the Missionaries of Charity--an order that began only in India but, by the time of her death in 1997, had spread to 120 countries around the world and continues to carry on her work.

In that 1946 experience, Mother Teresa not only heard God's call to give herself completely to service of the poor--she also had a profound and life-changing understanding of the incredible depths of God's

love--God's personal love--for herself, for the poor of the world, and for every single human being: you, me, everyone without exception. She remembered one of Jesus' words from the Cross: "I thirst". Now, thirst would have been a most natural physical experience of someone who was beaten and then crucified--Jesus had literally lost much of his blood by that time, and so would have been parched with a burning thirst. But 2000 years of prayer and reflection by the Church and her saints lead us to realize that Jesus thirsted not only for water for his body, but even more he thirsted for souls, for us and for people of every time and place to accept and love and follow him. Mother Teresa placed Jesus' words "I thirst" on the wall of the chapel in every one of her houses, to remind her and her sisters of Jesus' great thirst for them and for their love. Jesus' love for us is no mere sentiment, no vague or impersonal feeling of 'niceness'. No--it's a personal love, a passionate love; God is truly 'in love with' each and every one of us in a way infinitely beyond the passionate, romantic, 'falling-in-love' that exists between man and woman. There's a great line in this book referring to this 'divine thirst' for us and for our love: "though nothing in God needs us, everything in God wants us". Of course God doesn't need us in order to exist or to carry on God's work. But that's not the point--the point is that God wants us, desires us, thirsts for us, longs for us.

Just think about that for more than a second or two, and be utterly amazed--the infinite God, creator of the universe, loves and longs for and thirsts for you and me and every other person who ever lived and who ever will live. And yes, God indeed loves us just the way we are. But don't think that that means we don't have to change our ways or that we needn't turn away from sin. Jesus makes that crystal clear in the gospels with his constant call to us to repent and be converted. And as Fr. Langford says it so well in his book: "The same God who loves us as we are also loves us too much to leave us as we are." So God's mercy, priceless gift that it is, is certainly no license or excuse to sin on our part. Again in Fr. Langford's words: it is 'an invitation to new beginnings, free and clear, beyond the weight of past wrongs.' God never, ever hates the sinner. The only thing he hates is sin--and he hates sin precisely because of his love for us and the fact that sin leads us away from God and his love.

What does all this have to do with confession, sacrament of reconciliation? Everything. The more we know and remember that God loves us with a burning, passionate love, that he truly thirsts for us--the more willing and trusting we should approach God and his mercy, and the more willing and desirous we should be to approach him through the sacrament of reconciliation. Again--Jesus gave us this sacrament; he chose to exercise his ministry of forgiveness through the apostles and he gave them the power to forgive and absolve from sin in his name. That ministry is carried on through the apostles' successors, the bishops, and the priests who are their assistants. And if you are afraid of confession or stay away from it because of a bad experience in the past with an unkind priest, this is the time to move beyond that. Pray for that priest, whether he's living or dead--he needs it. But don't deprive yourself of the opportunity that Jesus gives you to experience personally and for yourself that great love that God has for you, his thirst for you and his desire that you thirst for him. Our sins, our freely-chosen acts and attitudes of selfishness are like a bag of garbage. You know what garbage is like--it's ugly and it stinks. Confession, the sacrament of reconciliation, is like a garbage dump--it's an opportunity to leave that ugly, smelly stuff behind and to be refreshed and cleansed by the healing love and mercy of God. Why would we not want to take advantage of that great gift?

I would simply remind you of the extra opportunities for confession during these last two weeks of Lent; I esp. recommend and encourage you to attend our communal penance service with individual confessions (tomorrow)/this afternoon at 3 p.m. here at St. Edward--I will be joined by five of my brother priests to celebrate this sacrament. And I hope you kept that confession guide from the bulletin last week--please feel free to bring that to confession w/you if you would find it helpful. Remember also God's words spoken by Jeremiah: "All...shall know me...for I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more." God thirsts for you, longs for you, desires you. God cannot help but

forgive and love the one who sincerely comes to him seeking mercy--love is what God is; forgive is what God does.