

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

7 March 2010

First Reading: Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12

Gospel: Luke 13: 1-9

TRUE LIBERATION

In October of this year, we in Zambia will be celebrating the 46th Anniversary of our Independence. Each year, on the 24th of October, we sing and dance and tell stories and pray to commemorate this great event when the Zambian people were liberated from the bondage of colonialism. Truly, such liberation is a wonderful moment that needs to be re-enacted and re-enforced each year.

The readings today on this Third Sunday of Lent speak in a powerful way about liberation. The first reading tells us of the liberation, the deliverance, that is promised to come from God to his Chosen People, the Israelites. And we know that such liberation is not only a physical and political thing. No, it is also profoundly a spiritual and holy thing.

Moses was sent by God to proclaim the good news that God had heard the cries of his people and had seen their terrible suffering. God himself was about to liberate the people from the yoke of slavery that was cruelly laid upon them by the Egyptians. Moses was called to lead them out of slavery into a prosperous country where they would suffer no more.

Egypt as a nation in the time of Moses represented a very bad experience in the lives of the Jews. They were forced to work long and hard hours in awful conditions. Indeed, the next time you see a picture of one of the great Egyptian pyramids, think of the Jews who were forced as slaves to work to build such monuments. The land of Egypt was later to symbolise oppression of any kind.

Today, very few people actually experience the terrible conditions of slavery. But there is one kind of slavery that we in Zambia need to pay special attention to these days and that is the slavery of human trafficking. This is a situation in which women and youngsters are lured into deceitful situations that tragically end up with them becoming prisoners subjected to the sexual demands of the business of prostitution and sexual exploitation. Human beings may also be trafficked for organ removal and cheap labour. This offends God in whose image we are all created. Victims are often the poor and those who have no means to improve their living conditions.

This is a particular problem that is growing larger as the World Cup in South Africa draws near, attracting thousands of people from around the world. Our churches and civil society organisations are cooperating with our Government in trying to prevent this sex trafficking. All of us should be on the alert about this problem.

However, there is another kind of slavery that nearly every human being can readily fall into. This is the slavery of sin. Sin cuts us off from God and the more we are captured by sinfulness the more misery we find ourselves in. We know this truth in our own life history and in the history of the people around us here in Zambia.

In the Gospel of today Jesus warns us that unless we repent of our sinfulness we will perish. We have no ordinary human power against sin. That means that we cannot save ourselves from sin through our own ordinary power. We need a power greater than sin itself in order to escape its clutches. We hear in the second reading of today St. Paul reminding us that such power comes from consuming the spiritual food and drink that Our Lord offers to us. God will always give us the strength to overcome sin.

We recall from the temptations of Jesus that we heard about in the First Sunday of Lent that the spiritual food that saves us from sin is the Word of God. The Scripture message helps us to put first things first and to rely on

God's loving protection. Therefore, when we learn to focus on the nourishment that protects us from sinfulness we will enjoy the kind of life that God promises his people in today's first reading. We will come to inhabit "a land rich and broad...flowing with milk and honey."

However, if we focus on "evil things" and worship "false gods" then the same fate that today's Gospel tells us befell the people of Galilee and the people of Siloam will be awaiting us. Our Christian lives can be spared from such destruction when we show the good fruit of love and faithfulness. But if this love and faithfulness does not grow in our ordinary daily lives, then the owner of the vineyard, God himself, will run out of patience and we will be cut down.

When we look around us in Zambia today we see so many people, old and young, rich and poor, who are wasting their lives in sin large and small. Just think of the corruption that is so sadly exposed in Government offices, depriving people of the goods and services we all need to live decent lives. Or think of our unemployed youth who begin each day at the local tavern and end up in all kinds of mischief. Or think of the husband or wife who abandons the vows of marriage and the responsibilities of family. These people are captured by sin and suffer much and cause much suffering.

Yet Yahweh, the God of our ancestors in faith -- Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Mukasa, Lwanga and Mutinta -- is waiting even now for us to allow him to liberate us from everything that makes us suffer. Many people suffer from all kinds of things, material and spiritual. Some people today do not have enough to eat, others are sick with incurable illnesses and others do not have a roof over their heads. Too many Zambians are unemployed or exploited or suffer human rights abuses. And many people, Christians and non-Christians, are weakened by their ignoring God's kind and wise guidance in the Commandments.

The Lord is telling us in his Word that he will come to our rescue. But like the people in the Old Testament, we need the help of church and civic leaders like Moses who are willing to become instruments of God's salvation. Sometimes these helpers can be as simple as the leaders of our small Christian community or the chair of our Parish Council. Or they can be local councillors or MPs or Ministers or our Government. But they must be ready to lead like Moses did, selflessly serving the good of the people even at great cost.

Yes, we can be like Moses to our people in Zambia and help bring about the reconciliation, justice and peace that the Second African Synod calls us to.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND SHARING IN SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

1. What are things in Zambia that hinder us to enjoy true liberation?
2. What is our experience of true liberation in our lives, spiritual and material?
3. What can we as individuals or community do from a faith experience and in practical terms to fight the social ills of corruption, unfaithfulness, unemployment, and addiction to drugs?

COMMUNITY PRAYERS

- Lord, you remind us that unless we repent of our sinfulness we will perish, give us the spiritual power and strength to overcome sin, *Lord hear us! Lord graciously hear us!*
- Lord, enable love and faithfulness grow in our ordinary lives so that we might become better persons every day of our lives, *Lord hear us! Lord graciously hear us!*
- Lord, we pray for our leaders so that they can selflessly serve us as instruments of God's salvation, *Lord hear us! Lord graciously hear us!*

