

April 7th, 2019, 5th Sunday of Lent, Year C

Isaiah 43:16-21

In 586 B.C., armies of the Babylonian Empire overran the kingdom of Judah. Jerusalem and its Temple were looted and destroyed. Thousands of Jews were deported from Judah to Babylon in the so-called "Babylonian Exile" This passage was composed in joyful response to the opposition and overthrow of Babylon by Cyrus of Persia.⁷

16 Thus says the Lord, The rest of this verse and the next one tell us who Yahweh is for He is the One: **who opens a way in the sea and a path in the mighty waters,** This refers to the parting of the waters of the Red Sea to let the Israelites pass over on dry land in their exodus from Egypt.⁶ This Exodus probably took place about 700 years before the people returned from Babylon.⁹

17 who leads out chariots and horsemen, a powerful army, This is Pharaoh's army in hot pursuit of the Israelites until the waters flooded back over them and they were drowned.⁶ **till they lie prostrate together, never to rise, snuffed out and quenched like a wick.** This is a reminder that it was God who split the sea for Israel to escape from the Egyptians.

18 Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; The author doesn't really mean to forget what God has done earlier, but we are not to dwell on it, nostalgically wishing that we lived back then, for God continues to perform saving deeds on behalf of His people.¹

19 see, I am doing something new! The prophet foresees a new exodus, a return to the Promised Land under God's power. This is the "something new" that the passage proclaims.¹ As God once vanquished the Egyptians and led Israel out of captivity, so now does God lead Israel out of Babylonian captivity.⁷ Another thought is that God is always doing something new even when He is calling us back from our one-hundredth infidelity to Him. Every act of salvation which He performs is a miracle in the sense that He is doing for us what is naturally impossible for us without His grace.⁴ **Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? Must you be so blind?² In the desert I make a way; in the wasteland, rivers.**

20 Wild beasts honor me, jackals and ostriches, The prophet gasps at the wonder of all nature, even wild beasts who honor this provident God.⁶ **for I put water in the desert and rivers in the wasteland for my chosen people to drink,** The Lord is not only a powerful deliverer, but he is also a provider, supplying the life-giving water in the desert for without it no life is possible.⁽⁶⁾ Just as water was provided in the desert during the former Exodus, so now is it provided in the new one.⁷

21 the people whom I formed for myself, The prophet draws words from the creative narrative of Genesis to hint at the more marvelous re-creation of the future.³ **that they might announce my praise.** With missionary zeal Israel will praise Yahweh before the world!³

The old exodus was temporary; the new exodus is forever. The word Anamnesis is from this great act of exodus. Anamnesis means to bring back, to continue, to recreate, to live. This is the heart of the Eucharistic prayer that constitutes the new exodus at every celebration of the Mass. The people are being told to stop looking in the past and look to the future, toward the permanent, new exodus.⁵

Philippians 3:8-14

Philippians is a letter written from prison. Paul faces the real possibility of death. Roman prisons were not penal institutions in which convicts served sentences. They were holding pens pending punishment, which was often torture, execution, or both. For early Christians in the Roman Empire, the credible threat of violence was never too

far away. The Philippian Church had recently endured strain, perhaps related to the presence there of people Paul perceives as opponents. However, the letter is a warm one for Paul was close to this community.⁷

Brothers and sisters:

8I consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. The knowledge of Christ given to the Apostle in the revelation on the road to Damascus started a relationship between he and Christ that far surpassed all the things that he gloried in before his conversion. The grace of the knowledge of Jesus Christ is the hidden treasure, the precious pearl referred to in Gospel parables (Mt. 13:44-46).⁸ **For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things** Here Paul is reflecting on his former condition and recording his attitude now some 20 years after his conversion in regard to wealth, honors and property.⁸ **and I consider them so much rubbish,** This is a strong expression for what Paul once regarded so highly.² **that I may gain Christ and be found in him,** This communion with Christ is to be constantly deepened until it reaches its fullness at the Last Judgment.²

9**not having any righteousness of my own based on the law** The goal of his former life as a Pharisee was to be found blameless in the sight of God through a perfect observance of the 613 prescriptions of the Mosaic Law.² **but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God,** His uprightness now is dependent only on his willingness and humility to accept the fact that that he must seek his salvation in God through faith.² **depending on faith**

10**to know him and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by being conformed to his death,** In order to know Christ and enjoy God in heaven, one needs to strive to share in Christ's sufferings.⁸ The Catechism says that through the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation the faithful are consecrated to be a holy priesthood.¹¹ (CCC 1546) It is in our suffering that we take on the priestly role proper to every follower of Christ. We offer up our own sacrifice of ourselves. We are a royal nation of priests. And the role of every priest is to offer sacrifice to God for the expiation of sin and in glory of his name.¹⁰ The Morning Offering is particularly important because we offer Jesus our prayers, works, joys and sufferings of the day in union with his sufferings. In 1 Peter 2:5 it says: "You too are living stones, built as an edifice of spirit, into a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."¹² Of course, our suffering is fittingly offered up in union with His Body in the sacrifice of the Mass when possible. It is not that his suffering is inadequate, for his Passion superabundantly completed the salvation of all mankind, but that he allows us to join in his redemptive work.¹⁰ In Colossians 1:24 Paul says: "I find my joy in the suffering I endure for you. In my own flesh I fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his body, the church." The Living Bible says: "Part of my work is to suffer for you; and I am glad, for I am helping to finish up the remainder of Christ's sufferings for his body, the church." The CCC says: "(Human beings) can also enter deliberately into the divine plan by their actions, their prayers, and their sufferings. They then fully become 'God's fellow workers' and co-workers for his kingdom."¹¹ Kellmeyer explains that "We must do the works of God, who sent Jesus. Jesus sees us as His co-workers, His partners. Whatever work God does in the created world, we are supposed to be doing as well. Without God, we could do none of it. With Him, we can do all of it. He doesn't need our help, He chooses that we help Him."¹⁰ Romans 8:17 says, "If children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him." All the Persons of the Trinity participated in accomplishing our salvation. All the persons of the Body participate in accomplishing each person's salvation.¹⁰

11if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Paul goes forth strengthened by hope in the resurrection.⁸

12It is not that I have already taken hold of it or have already attained perfect maturity, The goal of Christian striving is not attained in this life.⁸ but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it, People are not born holy. Holiness is forged through a constant interplay of God's grace and man's response.⁸ since I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ Jesus. Paul is probably referring to the experience on the road to Damascus. From that moment onwards he has striven single-mindedly to serve God.⁸

13Brothers and sisters, I for my part do not consider myself to have taken possession. Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, Growth in holiness always demands an effort. St. Paul here uses a vivid comparison—races in the stadium. Realizing that he has not reached perfection, he is still like a runner in a race, straining toward the goal.⁸

14I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God's upward calling, The Christian is called to share a life with Christ in glory but while he is here he must take the advice of Augustine to "always grow, always walk on, always advance; do not stop on the way, do not turn back, do not go off course. One who does not advance is standing still. It is better to hobble along the road that run on any other route."⁸ in Christ Jesus. St. Mark the Hermit wrote: "Everything that grows begins small. It is by constant and progressive feeding that it gradually grows big." Bl. Escriva says that "the holiness that the Lord demands of you is achieved by carrying out with love of God your work and your daily duties and these will almost always consist of ordinary little things."⁸

John 8:1-11

This gospel story has a complex history. It did not appear in the earliest manuscripts of the gospel and many feel that it was suppressed by the early church because the degree of mercy shown here was too much for the common person to understand correctly.⁶ St. Augustine said that the reason doubts were raised about the passage was that it showed Jesus to be so merciful that some rigorists thought it would lead to a relaxation of moral rules.¹⁵ It was, however, included in the official canon of the Scriptures according to the Council of Trent.¹⁵

1Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. We know that on a number of occasions our Lord withdrew to this area to pray. From ancient times it had been a place of prayer for David went there to adore God during the difficult period when Absalom was in revolt and there the prophet Ezekiel contemplated the glory of Yahweh entering the Temple. The Garden of Gethsemane was at the base of the hill and that is where Jesus prayed the night before he died.¹⁵

2But early in the morning he arrived again in the temple area, and all the people started coming to him, and he sat down and taught them.

3Then the scribes A scribe was an educated man, an intellectual, maybe a lawyer or even a scholar. They were teachers of the Law. Many were chosen to be Rabbis.⁵ and the Pharisees A Pharisee was a leader who practiced the observance of the Law to the maximum degree. The Pharisees were more concerned with keeping the external tenets of the Law than what was in your heart.⁵ brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and made her stand in the middle.

4They said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. This must have been a married woman because adultery in the Law was concerned with unfaithfulness on the part of the wife and not with affairs between husbands and unmarried women. In Lev. 20:10, it says that if a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the

adulteress shall be put to death. So what happened to the man? Nothing is mentioned of her lover, so he must have escaped.¹⁶

5Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say? The Pharisees are not seeking legal advice. Their question is a trap. If Jesus authorizes the stoning, the Pharisees will report him to the Romans for criminal wrongdoing, for the Jews were not permitted to administer capital punishment under Roman rule. If Jesus forbids the stoning, the Pharisees will discredit him as a false messiah who contradicts Moses, for the Torah classifies adultery as a capital crime and he would thus be breaking the Mosaic Law.¹³ The trap seems flawless.⁴

6They said this to test him, so that they could have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and began to write This situation is the only time in scripture where we are told that Jesus wrote.² on the ground with his finger. They reminded him of the Law! He in turn reminded them that he had written the Law! The same finger, in a symbolical sense, that was now writing in the tablets of stone of the temple floor, also wrote on the tablets of stone on Sinai! Had they eyes to see the Giver of the Law of Moses standing before them?¹⁴ An ancient explanation sees this as the fulfillment of a prophecy: "All who forsake you shall be... put to shame (literally, 'written on the earth;') they have forsaken the source of living waters" (Jer. 17:13). Jesus has just referred to himself as the source of "living waters" (7:37-38).¹³

7But when they continued asking him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." While Jesus clearly identifies adultery as sin, he eludes the trap for he neither authorizes the stoning nor contradicts Moses. The genius of his response is that it turns the tables on the Pharisees and forces them into their own trap. Although they probably considered themselves sinless, and thus qualified to administer the stoning, they realize that executing the adulteress will bring Rome's reprisal on them instead of Jesus, who is not truly authorizing the stoning because he does not truly think the Pharisees are without sin.¹³ This situation highlights the difficulty Christ faced in showing mercy and the amazing tact he used to do so.⁴

8Again he bent down and wrote on the ground. St. Bede comments that Christ who twice bends down to write on the ground teaches us to bend low in humility to examine ourselves both before and after addressing the faults of our neighbor.¹³ In Jesus there is the gospel of the second chance.⁵

9And in response, they went away one by one, beginning with the elders. These were the wisest and thus the first to detect the brilliance of Jesus' reply. By walking away, they are made to look like sinners and compromisers in the eyes of the crowd.¹³ **So he was left alone with the woman before him.**

10Then Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

11She replied, "No one, sir." Then Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin any more." Jesus neither condemns the woman nor condones her sins. He rather forgives her past and challenges her to live a life of purity in the future.¹³ In other Eastern religions one must purify self to commune with their god. Jesus brought a religion where the admission of sin is the condition of coming to him.¹⁴ The CCC explains that adultery refers to marital infidelity. When two partners, of whom at least one is married to another party, have sexual relations--even transient ones-- they commit adultery. Christ condemns even adultery of mere desire. The sixth commandment and the New Testament forbid adultery absolutely. The prophets denounce adultery; they see it as an image of the sin of idolatry.¹¹ (CCC 2380) Whoever commits adultery fails in his commitment. He does injury to the sign of the covenant which the marriage bond is, transgresses

the rights of the other spouse, and undermines the institution of marriage by breaking the contract on which it is based. He compromises the good of human generation and the welfare of children who need their parents' stable union.¹¹ (CCC 2381) The reason that Jesus did not condemn the woman was that he would be condemned for her. Justice would be saved, for he would pay the debt of her sins; mercy would be saved, for the merits of his death would apply to her soul. Jesus really was the only one in that crowd who had the right to take up the stone to execute judgment against her, because he was without sin. On the other hand, he did not make light of sin, for he assumed its burden. Forgiveness cost something and the full price would be paid on the hill of Calvary where justice would be satisfied and mercy extended.¹⁴

Some of the material for this commentary is taken from: (1) "workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 1998" by Lawrence E. Mück, (2) "The Jerome Biblical Commentary," (3) "The Book Of Isaiah Chapters 40-66" by Carroll Stublmüller, C.P., (4) The commentary notes of Sean Innerst and Tim Gray, (5) "The Bread of Life Catholic Bible Study" by Deacon Ken & Marie Finn, (6) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 2004" by Aelred R. Rossier, (7) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 2007" by James L. Weaver, (8) "The Navarre Bible: Captivity Epistles," (9) "Dictionary of the Bible" by John L. McKenzie, S.J., (10) "Bible Basics" by Steve Kellmeyer, (11) "Catechism of the Catholic Church," (12) "Apostleship Of Prayer: Daily Offering" www.apostlesofprayer.org, (13) "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of John," (14) "Life Of Christ" by Fulton J. Sheen, (15) "The Navarre Bible: St. John" and (16) "The Gospel According To John" by Raymond E. Brown, S.S..

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.