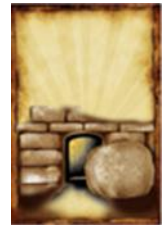


Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings
Lent Week Two, 2025



Sunday, March 16: *"Many conduct themselves as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction. Their God is their stomach... Their minds are occupied with earthly things"* (Phil 3:17-4:1).

When you read this passage, you can get stuck on "their God is their stomach!" What? Is Paul just being Paul, prone as he is to dramatic flair? No, in this case the Greek bears it out: it means exactly what it says, but the stomach is also a metaphor for a focus on earthly things. This is important. It helps define the meaning of "enemies of the cross of Christ."

It's not the "enemies of Christ," or "enemies of Christ's resurrection." It is the cross of Christ, the suffering of Christ, the call that *"anyone who wants to be my follower must pick up their cross daily."* There were false prophets in the early Christian communities, just as there are today, who prophesied what *The Message* calls the "easy street" approach to salvation. Paul is warning the people about these "wolves in sheep's clothing." The first Christians suffered a great deal, but ever since Christianity became the religion of the state in 300 C.E., it has enjoyed power and prestige, at times inflicting on others the kind of condemnation and oppression Jesus and the early church endured.

Provision: FAST from "easy street." How hard is it for you to be a Christian? Not having the label "Christian" which some people claim is under attack, but really following Christ, carrying your cross? Of course, there are those who carry true crosses of illness, sadness and grief, addiction, and the like. To follow Jesus, they do so with courage, faith, and hope. But how about the rest of us? What is your cross? Sometimes, the earthly temptation I face is to take the easy way out, to maintain the status quo and protect my current life by failing to speak out and work against hypocrisy. Let's avoid the "easy street." What action will you take today to help Christ do the hard work of carrying his cross?

Monday, March 17: *"Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned ...For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you"* (Lk 6:36-38).

I like Luke's Gospel. He says things plainly and gets to the point. These words today cause me to reflect on righteous anger and calling out hypocrisy and evil that we talked about yesterday. Now Jesus does this all the time—just look at Matthew 23 which we read from tomorrow to see how Jesus gets to the point about what he thinks of the elders' hypocrisy! (A skeptic might say Jesus did indeed get measured out to him what he measured to others!) But unlike Jesus, and like the elders, I am a hypocrite. I preach but do not always practice. Who am I to call out others when I, like Isaiah, am a person of unclean lips as well?

Provision: PRAY for the Spirit's guidance. When I complain about things I see as wrong in our world, or when I call out lies from our leaders, it tends to devolve into a personal attack. And while much of what is in Matthew 23 does sound like a personal attack on the elders, Jesus is also willing to engage them. He condemns their actions, but not who they are. Even though we humans are not saints and prophets (but remember, saints and prophets didn't start that way), God still calls us to speak up, to act. Pray for guidance. Don't use human weakness as an excuse for silence in the face of lies.

Tuesday, March 18: *"[The scribes and the Pharisees'] works are performed to be seen. They widen their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels. They love places of honor at banquets, seats of honor in synagogues"* (Mt 23:1-12).

A phylactery is a small leather box containing Jewish scripture. Orthodox Jewish men wear them on their foreheads as a symbol of keeping God's word "top of mind." Ostensibly, the wider the phylactery, the more pious the wearer, which in some cases may be very true. Jesus takes issue, though, with those who make a show of holiness but lack compassion in their hearts.

What would be the Christian equivalent today? In the Roman church, some like honoring the King with the pageantry of lace trains and tall mitres. I cannot pretend to judge their hearts but also can't help imagining Jesus running away as he did in John 6:15, not wanting to be made king! Those who preach the prosperity gospel could be examples too. Again, I don't begrudge them their riches, if their God is still God, and they work for justice and give generously from their bounty. And yes, I must look each day at where I have made a show of something for my own ego and not for God.

Provision: ACT for the greater glory of God. Remember Jesus' words on Ash Wednesday. Do good things for God that only God knows about. Don't worry about who sees them or who gets the credit. Today, do something good in secret for someone or for some cause. God sees what you do and will reward you.

Wednesday, March 19: *"For this reason, it depends on faith, so that it may be a gift"*(Rom 4:13, 16-18, 22). *When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel had commanded him and took his wife into his home* (Mt 1:16, 18-21, 24).

Today, in the Catholic and some Protestant denominations, we celebrate the person and the faith of St. Joseph. We talked yesterday about acting quietly for the greater glory of God, and indeed, Joseph did just that. And, as we talked about Sunday, he surely did not take the easy road, one that was well within the law for him to do. But as we hear in Paul's letter to the Romans, faith is not about the law. It is a gift given freely to us by God.

Provision: PRAY for the faith of Joseph. Joseph, like Mary, like the saints and the prophets on Monday, were human beings. The gift of faith they received is a gift available to each of us as well. If you are a person of faith, pray to St. Joseph for the courage to open that gift even further, aware that it may not lead you on the easiest of paths. If faith is still a concept for you or a gift you've not yet opened, pray that, like Joseph, you will listen closely for God's call.

Thursday, March 20: *"I am the Lord who probes the heart, testing the conscience and allotting to humans according to their ways, according to the fruit of their deeds"*(Jer 17:5-10, Hebrew). *"Remember that you received what was good... while Lazarus likewise received what was bad; but now he is comforted, whereas you are tormented"*(Lk 16:19-31).

The gospel today is the story of Lazarus and the rich man. For those of us blessed with plenty, it's a "squirm in your seat" reading. But I take some solace in knowing God sees my heart. I believe I have good intentions, but we all know where that can lead: "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." It is the "fruit of my deeds," "the measure with which I measure" that I will face in my heart and my conscience, for comfort or for torment, at the end of my earthly days.

Provision: GIVE from your heart. The world would be a far better place if people gave from their need to give, or even from their hope for personal salvation. But true giving comes from a loving heart. It is not the amount of money we give or the time we spend. If the source of our giving is an open and compassionate heart, the fruits of our deeds will be sweet and nourishing. Take time to examine today why you give. Is it out of obligation or guilt? See if you can soften your heart by looking into the eyes of those to whom you give. The fruit of that deed will be sweet for you, too.

Friday, March 21: *Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons ... When his brothers saw that their father loved him best ... they hated him so much that they would not even greet him* (Gn 37:3-4). *"This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and acquire his inheritance."* *They seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him* (Mt 21:38-39).

These readings are uncomfortable. They are about egoism, envy, jealousy, and revenge. Very human stories we see played out in the Bible many times. Stories we see played out in today's news. It's amazing how some people don't see the parallels. In fact, even the word parallel doesn't do it justice. I imagine the ancients we read about in Scripture would be horrified to see what we do today; it reminds me of what Jesus said a few weeks ago about the Queen of Sheba and the Ninevites judging the people of his generation! How would his generation look at us?!

Egoism: "It's all about me. I am self-centered and uncaring." Jealousy: "Don't you dare take away or threaten what's mine. I am selfish and suspicious." Envy: "I covet what 'they' have. I am resentful, ungrateful, and scheming." Revenge: "I'm going to make sure the 'other' gets what's coming to them. I am hateful and unmerciful." These are toxic emotions, sins that lead to terrible decisions, terrible acts, and terrible lives.

Provision: PRAY for those whose hearts are hard. Especially for yourself if you are in the grip of any of these painful emotions. Pay attention when these feelings arise. They are insidious and can creep up on any one of us. Pray too for God to soften the hearts of those in leadership positions whose fear, insecurity, or evil intent lead them to make bad decisions that impact thousands of lives.

Saturday, March 22: *"Now the older son had been out in the field...he heard the sound of music and dancing. He called one of the servants [who] said to him, 'Your brother has returned, and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf' ... He became angry, and he refused to enter the house"*(Lk 15:1-3, 11-32).

Speaking of toxic emotions, let's go ahead and add bitterness to the list! It's one I've heard mentioned recently regarding US politics: people feeling bitterness towards those whose votes have put our current situation into motion. My bitterness is more towards leaders, on both sides of the aisle, who have failed, and are failing to fight to keep our democracy intact. But as is the case with the older son today, those who are bitter don't get to feel joy.

Provision: FAST from bitterness. I've talked to several people who have no sympathy for people who are suffering at the hands of the very leaders they voted for. Bitterness will get us nowhere and will only serve to make things worse. Spend time today ridding your heart of bitterness. Journal about how you feel. Do this before you go out into the world to take action. Take time during the day to make sure bitterness is not making a comeback.