

3rd Sunday of Lent (C): The Lord is kind and merciful

Exodus 3:1-8a,13-15; Psalm 103:1-2,3-4,6-7,8,11; 1 Corinthians 10:1-6,10-12; Luke 13:1-9

Dear family and friends of CCST,

I am thankful for all your prayers for my sick mother. I am glad that I could visit and stay with her during my vacation. Seeing her lying in bed, so weak and skinny, I asked myself what would be the source of my strength and joy when my body is weak and can no longer do what I used to be? I found it difficult to answer if I only dwell on what I see. It is not just about health. It is about my faith in Jesus which my mother undoubtedly is holding on in her life. Faith does not explain why; it rather strengthens us. It may not give us another younger body, but it gives us hope.

We sing today's responsorial psalm, "The Lord is kind and merciful" (Psalm 103:8), proclaims such faith, and it is a hinge that ties up our readings on this third Sunday of Lent.

The scripture readings provide us the never-ending story of kindness and mercy of God amid the never-ending human drama of iniquity of sin and forgiveness, unfaithfulness and reconciliation, waywardness, and returning home. They are meant to awaken and renew our awareness and appreciation of God's saving actions and embrace our capacity to live a holy life. However, how are we living this kindness and mercy of God?

In the first reading, we see how God, in His graciousness, chooses, inspires, and guides people like Moses to set free the people he loves from slavery in Egypt to the promised land. God feels for his people; he feels their sufferings; he faithfully journeys with them. The good news is God always used an instrument to manifest his kindness and mercy. He uses people willing to listen to his words and be led by his plan, people, who speak the truth, not niceties; hence, one could be nice but not truthful. St. Paul has it in our second reading. He warns the Corinthians that if they chose their ways, not God's, and take for granted his commandments, they will become an enslaved person like Israel of old. He warns that sin leads a person to enslavement and unfreedom. Discernibly, a warning could also be a source of good news. The good news comes not only in comforting words but also disturbing, that is, words that are not nice and we do not like to hear. Christians should also look at warnings as a bearer of good news because they exist to wake us up, to make us attentive and discerning.

In the Gospel, Jesus warns his listeners: "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were greater sinners than all other Galileans? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did" (Luke 13:2-3). He appears to say: You have been warned, and you have been told. But if you choose to keep your sinful way, you have determined your destiny worst than those people whose destinies you find wrong. There are warnings in life that we need to pay attention to. But the choice or decision depends on us. Will we choose a life of grace, or will we prepare to remain slaves to sin?

After instilling to his listeners the sense of urgency to repent, Jesus adds a parable of the fig tree. The parable tells us that the vineyard owner decided to cut down the fig tree because it no longer bears fruit and takes so much space in the vineyard, and he could have used the area for good use to a better tree. But the parable ends with the gardener pleading with the owner: "Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future" (Luke 13:8-9). He pleads that he will patiently give it love and care, hoping that it will bear fruit. Like the gardener, Jesus prunes, fertilizes, cultivates, waters us so that we will bear fruit. He gives us all the opportunity and graces and will not get tired from caring. He is amazingly generous in providing us with time and will lavishly invest his attention in us. However, there is a warning – there is time to be cut down. It is painful to be cut off or separated from the source of life, and the attitude of taking for granted his grace and unrepentant life kills the growth of the amazing gift of holiness.

Our gracious God is also vulnerable. He does not force us to accept his love. Even if he pours into our hearts his saving love, the human spirit can say: "No, I do not want you. I am preparing to return to Egypt; I have forgotten you. I prepare to follow other gods than you. Like the infidelity of Israel of old, this leads to further enslavement. But let us remember that on the Cross, we find the graciousness of God, the zeal of God to save us. God has offered his Son, bearing the suffering that's ours, bearing all the pains, sorrows, insults that we sinners deserve. God did not give up on us; he instead gave up his Son, Jesus. During the Stations of the Cross, we proclaim this by saying, "For by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world." The world and all of us were saved from death, from eternal punishment, and gifted us the dignity of a redeemed people. It's his love that saves. He continues to invite us to respond to his offer of love because he desires our human history to be a history of salvation, not damnation where his love triumphs.

In his new book entitled "Blessed Carlo Acutis: Five steps to being a Saint," Monsignor Anthony Figueiredo reflects the ways of living the kindness and mercy of God. They are five regular appointments with God: Holy Mass, Adoration,

Confession and spiritual guidance, befriending the Blessed Mother and the saints, and charity. These five appointments with God are like scaffolding that will hold our spirit firm and steadfast, and they are practical and achievable, but we have to desire to be holy. In this season of Lent, let us make our regular appointments with God to rekindle our gratitude for being saved and embrace our capacity to live a holy life, whether, in sickness or health, we are confident that God's grace sustains us.

God bless you!

Fr. Manny Hewe