**FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT**

**3rd April 2022**

**Reading I: Isaiah 43:16-21**

In our reading, the impending return from exile in Babylon is depicted as a second Exodus. The "former things" and the "things of old" refer to the first Exodus from Egypt. This is now replaced by a "new thing" the return from exile in Babylon. In this new event the events of the first Exodus are repeated, as God says, “1 will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert"

In Christianity, the proclamation of God's act of salvation in Christ picks up the same imagery. The "new things" now become the death and resurrection of the Messiah, and the "drink" that God provides for his people consists of the sacraments of the new covenant.

Exodus and Exile could never simply be historical events for the good reason that God was understood by what he did in the past. He was known by the people of God through their history.

And so Israel looked forward to a new exodus and a new covenant. For Christians, these came along 600 years after the date of our reading - with the death and resurrection of Christ.

**Responsorial Psalm: 126:1-6**

The Response is aware of God being known principally through his mighty deeds of the past. The first verse appears to recall the moment when the Jews were liberated from their Babylonian exile. Slavery had been characterised by bitter tears of hopelessness and release from prison by singing and laughter.

On this Sunday, we can only see the approaching Passion and death of Our Lord, though if we remember God’s deeds of the past, then we must be prepared to celebrate those yet to come.

It should not be forgotten that sowing in the Old Testament was a clear sign of the work of the Messiah. As he scattered his ‘word’ so the faithful were those who reaped it.

**Reading II: Philippians 3:8-14**

Once newly established, the earliest Christian congregations would be vulnerable prey for heretics. Sometimes these would be Gnostics, trying to hijack the unwary with outlandish tales of Miracles, and the secrets of magic. Or, they might be Judaisers, that is, advocates of imposing the Jewish law on Gentile converts. This would have turned the Church into just another sect of Judaism.

All were threats, especially when the Evangelists had moved on to other towns. The third chapter of Philippians is a polemic against Paul's opponents. Exactly what they hawked, we cannot say, but from the letter it seems that they were preaching a sinlessness after Baptism.

This was a known contemporary heresy, that the baptised had "already attained" salvation and were already perfect. (It can still be found in modern Christian sects, such as The Brethren) Against their position Paul holds out his theology of the cross, not simply as an abstract doctrine but as a reality to which his whole life as an apostle was dedicated.

Only by becoming like Christ in his death, only by sharing his suffering and living under the "not yet," can the Apostle know the power of Christ's resurrection now, and eventually attain the resurrection when Christ returns. Henceforth, Paul's whole life becomes a radical appraisal of 'religion' Christ has taken possession of Paul - but Paul is not complacent.

He draws an analogy with the ‘games’ in the amphitheatres so familiar to Roman society of the time. Like a runner at the last stage of a race he keeps his eye on the winning tape and does not look back: the prize is yet to be won. Paul presses on, leaving behind him the privileges of his Jewish past, his blamelessness according to the law, the self-righteousness that flowed from it, and the painful memory of his persecution of the Church. He looks now only to 'the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.' With that goal in view nothing else at all matters.

**Gospel: John 8:1-11**

It has been recognised for many years that this story does not belong to John’s Gospel. The style, the vocabulary and the theme are all typically Luke’s and some very early manuscripts actually place it at Luke 21;38. But, I find that the most curious fact about it is that its length would exactly fit one sheet of papyrus. Papyri were sewn together to make a continuous scroll and stitching would sometimes come loose. If not immediately repaired, the sheets would be mislaid or inserted loose in the wrong scroll and it is quite credible that this may have happened to the story of the woman caught in adultery, who moved from Luke to John. There is however no reason to doubt that it bears all the hallmarks of authenticity.

Note that it is only the woman they brought forward. In fact, the law was explicit that both adulterous parties be executed (Leviticus 20;10 and Deuteronomy 22;22) but it was rarely enforced, all judges being men.

The purpose of the scribes and pharisees in bringing her to Jesus was to set a snare for him. If Jesus pardoned her, he could be accused of encouraging people to break the law of Moses which prescribed death by stoning for such conduct (Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 13:9-10). But, if he would agree with Moses, that she should be stoned to death, he would lose his reputation for mercy.

In fact, as the late wisdom literature makes clear, that grim prescription had long been a dead letter - but the law was still on the statute book and could still be invoked as a challenge to Jesus.

Jesus deftly turned the challenge: let the woman's accusers look to their own sins! He will not be judge. Although the Father had given full authority to his Son to pass judgment (John 5:22) Jesus really judges no one (8:15). His message is of mercy and forgiveness.

The picture of his ‘writing in the sand’ is sometimes supposed to be a list of the woman’s sins, sand being a impermanent medium. But, it could equally be doodling, waiting for a response. And, the significance of the eldest leaving first is that society followed the lead of the eldest, who was credited with seniority and wisdom.

The story ends with the quiet scene of reconciliation between Jesus and the woman and Jesus is left alone with her to proclaim God's mercy.