

## FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT, CYCLE C

**Open with a prayer:** *God of mercy, this week we listen to readings that powerfully speak to us of your mercy and at the same time call us to turn away from sin. Help us to make this message our own. Help us to always remember that while you hate and condemn sin, you always love the sinner. This we pray through Christ our Lord, Amen.*

**Sharing of life:** What are you most and least grateful for this week?

**Facilitator reads focus statement:** Once again, our readings speak to us of God's mercy and unconditional love. In the first reading, the Israelites are living in exile from their homeland and God promises a new exodus. God is about to do a "new thing" for them - show them his mercy and love. In the gospel, a condemned woman is the recipient of God's mercy and unconditional love. Paul was also the recipient of God's mercy.

If you have not read the commentary on the reading, consider reading it after each reading.

### FIRST READING: Isaiah 43:16-21

Today's first reading is from what is called in Isaiah the *Book of Consolation* (chs 40-55). These chapters were written to encourage the Israelites while they were living in exile in Babylon and in danger of losing hope in God's love for them. With imagery that hearkens back to the Exodus story, as well as the creation story of Genesis, the author exhorts his fellow Jews to trust that God will have mercy on them and come to their aid. The prophet assures them that God is about to do a "new thing" for them. They will experience a new Exodus. The mighty God who created the world and freed their ancestors from Egypt is about to perform another mighty saving event on their behalf.

### PSALM 126

These verses reflect the exiles' joy after their liberation from captivity.

### SECOND READING: Philippians 3:8-14

When Paul encountered Christ on the road to Damascus, he too became the recipient of God's mercy and unconditional love. In today's verses, Paul shares with us what this new life in Christ means to him. *"I consider everything as loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus."* His new life is a total gift. Prior to his Damascus experience, (Acts 9), Paul believed himself to be a "self-made" man, someone who saved himself by his observance of the law. Now he has a totally new mind-set. He now knows that all that he is a total gift from God. He is a "graced sinner." The imprisoned Paul says that his present sufferings are a way for him to conform himself a little more to his Savior who suffered so much for him.

### GOSPEL: John 8:1-11

This is what biblical scholars call an "entrapment story". In this event, Jesus' enemies, the Pharisees, try to entrap him. They bring to him a woman who has been caught in adultery. (They obviously saw no need to bring the *man*.) They say to Jesus, *"Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of committing adultery. Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So, what do you say?"* If Jesus pardoned the woman, he could be accused of encouraging people to break the Law of Moses. If he agreed that she should be stoned, he would lose his reputation for mercy. The Pharisees must have really thought they had him, but Jesus outsmarts them. He does this by turning the focus on them and their sins. *"Let the one among you without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."* Jesus writes on the ground. Some have suggested that he wrote the sins of the accusers. *"They went away, one by one, beginning with the elders."* Jesus turns the tables on the accusers. Now they become the accused. They come to Jesus only aware of the *woman's* sins. They go away aware of *their own* sins.

Finally, Jesus is left with the woman. Commenting on this story, St. Augustine says, *"only two are left, misery and mercy."* Jesus communicates to the shame-filled woman God's mercy and unconditional love. She experiences the "new thing" (God's mercy and love), which Isaiah spoke about in the first reading. Then Jesus challenges the woman to

"*go and sin no more.*" Jesus condemns sin, pardons the sinner and calls her to repentance. He also calls the woman's accusers to conversion. They are called to let go of their sin of condemnation of the woman.

## **FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS**

1. What verse, idea or image spoke to you in today's readings? Why?
2. In the first reading, Isaiah speaks about God doing a "new thing". What "new thing" do you see God doing in our world, church or your life today?
3. Also in the first reading Isaiah tells us to "*remember not the events of the past*" and in the second reading, Paul tells us that, "*he gives no thought to what lies behind*". Why do some of us have such a difficult time letting go of the past?
4. What is the darkness or sin in *us* that gives us satisfaction of pointing out the sins of *others*?
5. In the book of Ezechiel, God says that 'he desires *not* the death of the sinner but that he repents and lives. Why do you think that 70% + of Americans, including church going Catholics, desire the execution of criminals rather than letting them live in the hope that they would repent of their sins?

## **RESPONDING TO THE WORD**

Name one way you can put into practice the message of these readings. Suggestions: Pray for the race to let go of what in your past you need to let go of *and* for the grace to see what "new thing" God may be now doing in your life. If you have a tendency to judge others and name their sins, try to focus on your own sins and seek the grace of true repentance for them.

## **CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION**

Especially pray for the grace of true repentance of sin and the grace to totally accept God's mercy. Pray that the Parish Penance Services may be grace filled events for all who come. Pray for all preparing for baptism and entrance into our church this Easter.©

### ***Note to Facilitators***

Next week you will reflect on Passion Sunday readings. Do you plan to read the Passion story in your group or do you want the participants to read the story ahead of time?

## **EVENING PRAYER**

Blessed are you, God, almighty Lord,  
who made the sun to give light to the day  
and brightened the night  
with shining stars:  
you have brought us through another day  
and led us to the threshold of night;  
hear our prayer and the prayers  
of your people.

Forgive us all the sins we have committed  
deliberately or in weakness.

Receive our evening prayers  
and pour out upon your adopted children  
the riches of your goodness and mercy.

Set your holy angels round about us,  
clothe us with justice,

strengthen us with your power.  
Deliver us from every attack of the devil  
who seeks to ensnare us.  
Grant that this evening, and the night to come,  
and all the days of our life  
may pass in holiness and peace.  
Amen.