

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent – (Year C) – December 9, 2018

BAR 5:1-9; PS 126:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6; PHIL 1:4-6, 8-11; LK 3:1-6

Jesus was a master storyteller, using imagery in his parables that spoke to the people of his time. Because he rubbed elbows with **shepherds** and **farmers** and **royalty**, it was natural for his parables to employ images of **sheep**, **seeds**, **crops** and **kings**. To us “**urban folk**”, those images may strike us as **quaint**, but they certainly don’t speak to us in the same way as they did to Jesus’ audiences.

More on **parable imagery** in a moment. For now, let’s turn to the **Scripture Readings** for today. The main focus in today’s **1<sup>st</sup> Reading** and **Gospel** has to do with preparing **roads** for the Lord’s coming—words that we have heard many times before. But there’s **another** aspect of **preparing** for the **Lord’s coming** in today’s Scriptures that might not be as **evident**...until we dive a little deeper.

We just heard in our **Gospel**:

*[John the Baptist] went throughout [the] whole region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins... (Lk 3:3)*

This is a great starting point for our reflection on the Scripture Readings for the **2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent**, especially because we’re knee-deep in “**extra Confession**” season across the diocese. Since Advent is a season of **preparation**, there is no better way to prepare for the coming of the Messiah than to allow him to **wash our souls clean**.

I don’t know if it’s the same for other priests, but sometimes hearing Confessions can be sort of an “**out of body experience**” for me. When I sit in my Confessional here at the Cathedral, and someone is on the face-to-face side of the Confessional with me, my chair is **between** the penitent—to my **left**—and **Jesus**—(on a Crucifix high on the wall)—to my **right**.

From that “**vantage point**” I very often witness the Lord’s **love** and **mercy** penetrating the penitent’s heart. Of course, the priest plays an active role in this dynamic, but it nevertheless feels, at times, like I’m just a **spectator**, watching the Lord work his wonders on a soul.

To facilitate this kind of heart-to-heart encounter between Jesus and the penitent, and to help the penitent understand **what the Lord will work** in his or her soul as a result of a good Confession—I often present the image of an **aqueduct**—one of those high “**bridges**” used in the ancient world to transport water from a **natural water source** to a city. I have the penitent imagine an aqueduct between *their heart*, and the **Sacred Heart of Jesus**. The difference here is that this **spiritual aqueduct** transports the **love and mercy of Jesus**, instead of **water**.

Then I explain how **mortal sin** “*breaks this bridge*”. The love and mercy continue to flow incessantly from Jesus’ Sacred Heart—his love never **stops** flowing—but it cannot **reach** the penitent’s heart...because the **bridge is out!**

Confession, then, is—in a certain sense—the **repair** of the bridge between **Jesus’ heart** and the **penitent’s heart**. The love of Jesus for sinners flows continually, *even when they’re in the midst of committing their worst sin*. It’s their **mortal sin** makes it impossible for that love and mercy to reach their heart...until the “bridge” can be repaired. And it is the remission of sins in the Sacrament of Penance that **bridges** the two sides—that **reconnects** the two *hearts*.

In the Confessional, a priest really is a **bridge-repairer** who reconnects the aqueduct in order to restore the flow of the Lord’s love and mercy to its intended destination—the soul of the penitent. Sometimes you can actually see when the flow “**hits**” the person’s heart. Their **face** changes, their **posture** changes...even their **eyes** change! This is one of the greatest blessings of being a priest—to witness such **unmistakable workings of grace**.

Now ] an ancient aqueduct is rather **dated** and even **foreign** image for to those who have never seen a real one. But rather than discarding this image just because it’s **old** and **unfamiliar**, perhaps we can see even more deeply into the workings of Jesus’ Divine Mercy by **supplementing** the aqueduct image with something a little **closer to home**...something a little more *familiar*: the system of **canals** coursing through the greater Phoenix area.

Now, if you’ve ever walked along one of those paths next to an empty, dry canal here in the city, you’ll see the rather disgusting array of trash that people toss in

there. Things like **mattresses, appliances, clothes, furniture, tires** and all manner of **beverage containers** to name just **some** of the disgusting refuse.

This is a shocking contrast to what is visible when the canals are **full** and **flowing**. While you may occasionally see a **Gatorade bottle** floating next to a **duck** swimming in a full canal, the flowing water is, for the most part, a pleasant scene to take in. After all, **any surplus of water in Phoenix is a welcome sight!** But all that filthy trash is **still** there—*below the surface*—even though we can't see it through the water that flows over it.

Whereas the broken aqueduct image helps us understand the effects of **mortal sin**, the canal imagine provides insight into **another** aspect of our spiritual life: **venial sin**. Many of us do not take venial sin nearly as seriously as we should, because life can still **seem** to be *flowing along nicely* and things can still look **pretty good** at a surface—**superficial**—level even when we've committed a bunch of venial sins. Or so we convince ourselves...

But when we look **under** the surface, we see what's **really** in the water. And while the trash that accumulates in the canal does not completely impede the flow of the water, it certainly **contaminates** it. And if enough junk is allowed to accumulate, it **will**—*eventually*—**divert** or even **block** the intended flow of the water.

**Mortal sin** completely *breaks* our relationship with God.

**Venial sin injures** our relationship with the Lord and left **unchecked**, can **accumulate** and *mutate* into something so toxic that it can **become** as deadly as mortal sin.

One line from today's **Psalm** holds within in the hope we have every time we take advantage of the Lord's mercy in the **Sacrament of Penance**:

*Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the torrents in the southern desert.* (Ps 126:4)

There are two definitions of the word “**torrent**”, both of which offer us hope— from a spiritual point of view— as we consider the dynamics of sin as illustrated by our **aqueduct** and **canal** images.

The **first** definition of “torrent” is: *a strong and fast-moving stream of water or other liquid.*

The **second** definition of “torrent” is: *a sudden, violent, and copious outpouring of (something)*

Both definitions present a picture of a **powerful rush** of water, strong enough to wash away **anything** in its path. On a **supernatural** level, this is a **hope-inspiring image** of the power of *grace* to wash away all of our sins and fill us with spiritual refreshment.

In the **2<sup>nd</sup> Reading** today, taken from **St. Paul’s Letter to the Philippians**, the Saint writes:

*I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus.* (Phil 1:6)

If we have allowed the Lord to speak to our hearts through the **Sacred Scriptures** and our deeper **reflection** on our **Readings** today; and if we are more motivated to seek the Lord’s mercy in the **Sacrament of Penance**, then the Lord has indeed **begun** a good work in us.

The ball is now in our court to **respond** to the Lord’s invitation, so that he can **continue** to complete his good works in us...until he returns in all his glory to take his **faithful, holy** ones home with him...to heaven.

Please God that **we** are among those he comes to collect when he **does** return!