

1st Sunday of Lent

Prayer, fasting and almsgiving are three traditional penitential disciplines for Lent. We heard about all of them in the gospel on Ash Wednesday, and the readings of these early days in Lent often refer back to them one by one. Today's first reading opens and closes with a remark about almsgiving; in this case not so much an offering for the poor but an offering made back to God, the source of every blessing.

Throughout Lent each year the first readings at Sunday Mass form a mini-series, leaping across the Old Testament for an overview of our salvation history. On the second Sunday each year we hear about Abraham; on the third we hear about Moses; the fourth this year concerns King David, and the reading on the fifth Sunday always comes from one of the prophets around the time of the exile.

Today's passage from Deuteronomy is out of sequence—it takes place later than the readings we'll hear the next two weeks. But in it Moses tells of something much earlier, the day that Abraham left his home in modern Iraq and on foot “went down to Egypt with a small household and lived there as an [immigrant]. But there he became a nation great, strong, and numerous.” Moses descended from that nation and himself was among the Israelites who later suffered maltreatment due to oppressors—like we see today. The people prayed, and God rescued them by sending plagues to afflict the enemy—an early example of sanctions. Moses explained to the people how far they had come: “We cried out to the Lord, the God of our Fathers, and he heard our cry and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. He brought us out of Egypt... [and] gave us this land flowing with milk and honey.” We pray for a similar happy ending for those engaged in war today.

Moses was near his death. After leading the people all the way from Egypt, he told them what to do when they finally entered the Promised Land without him: Remember the past, remember how God helped our ancestors. Then, as you reap your first harvest, give alms, bringing the firstfruits in a basket as an offering to the Lord, and “bow down in his presence.”

Lent invites us to practice prayer, fasting, and—today especially—almsgiving in thanksgiving for all that God has done for us. As we look back on the long history of our families, we too may enumerate the wonders of God.

One way to observe Lent this week is to recall such stories from your own family history and tell them to one another. To prepare, ask yourselves, “How did God act within our family? How did we start small and grow large? What obstacles did our family face? Did our ancestors cry out to God? How did God respond?” Such questions will keep the memory of the dead alive, reassure us in hard times that God has responded in the past, and prepare us to expect new wonders from God, who has even raised the dead to life.

That will motivate us to give thanks by giving alms. You all do this already: you pay for the education of your children and grandchildren; you alleviate their debt. You buy gifts for those you love. You contribute to your church. You give to the poor. Those disciplines find a special home in Lent. We do what Moses urged his people to do: remember the blessings of the past and give alms.