

## 5th Sunday of Lent

Regret stifles hope. At times concerns about finances, relationships, family, work or faith may consume us. Looking back helps us understand our problems. But regret about the past may stifle hope in the future.

Today's first reading explores that feeling. On the Fifth Sunday of Lent each year the first reading completes a survey of Old Testament history with a passage from one of the prophets. Today Isaiah tells of Israel's return from a long period of exile, and we hear it against the backdrop of Ukrainians going through their own refugee crisis as millions are fleeing unjust aggression. Ancient Israel too faced a crisis when armies invaded their homeland, and people fled into decades of fear, poverty and uncertainty.

When the Israelites remembered their past, they recalled the Exodus from Egypt: God had parted "the mighty waters" of the sea so that the people could cross, and the "powerful army" that pursued them lay "prostrate together, never to rise, snuffed out and quenched like a wick," as the waters returned to their natural depth. This event seemed deep in the past, something God had done long ago, but those days were over. Now, instead of experiencing freedom, the same people were enslaved; instead of enjoying their homeland, they were in exile. They looked back on the past filled with regret and without hope.

Through Isaiah, God gave this peculiar advice: "Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not." The people were looking upon the past as something forever lost. To change their perspective, the Lord speaks as if the Exodus were happening now in the present tense: He calls himself "the Lord, who opens a way in the sea and a path in the mighty waters, who leads out chariots" of the enemy into the mud of their defeat. God tells suffering Israel, "See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? In the desert I make a way, in the wasteland, rivers." God's deeds are not long past; they happen now.

One reason regret may pull us down is that we remember the happiness of the past as if it could never return. We think back on the joys of an earlier version of our life. We thank God for things that went well back then. Those memories should boost our confidence, but sometimes they discourage us from thinking God can do anything with us now. We are all too aware of our sin, our bad decisions, our failures, and we remember the past as some idealized life, better than it probably was, and that can never come back again.

But, as we enter the final stage of this Lent, we hear something else: "Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not" if these fill you with despair instead of hope. The Lord says to each of us, "See, I am doing something new!" As God rescued Israel from Egypt through the Exodus, as God returned his people to their homeland after exile, so God can do it again for the people of Ukraine and for you. The penance we do this Lent—our prayer, our fasting, our almsgiving—whatever we do, brings us into a six-week exile to atone for our sin. God can take the desert of our life and make a new way. Through a good Lent, we can discover in our own arid wasteland rivers of new life.