

Meditations: Tuesday of the Third Week of Lent

Some reflections that can assist our prayer during this season of Lent.

- God wants the sacrifice of our heart
- Returning to the Father in this Lent
- Forgiving because we know we have been forgiven

AMONG the Jews deported to Babylon was Azariah, one of the young men *both of the royal family and of the nobility, youths without blemish, handsome and skilful in all*

wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to serve in the king's palace (Dan 1:3 -4). Well versed in the Babylonian language and literature, he had even been given a Chaldean name: Abednego. The first chapters of the book of Daniel recount for us the adventures of Azariah, Hananiah, Mishael and Daniel, and how the four of them strove to remain faithful to God and to the customs of their people amid a hostile environment.

In his prayer inside the fiery furnace, Azariah's thoughts transcend their immediate suffering. His heart never stops suffering on account of the situation in Israel, and he tries to understand the disaster that the deportation to Babylon has meant for the chosen people. God freed his people from slavery and gave them a land where they could live in freedom. But now all these marvels

have been reduced to a painful memory. *For we, O Lord, Azariah prays, have become fewer than any other nation, and are brought low this day in all the world because of our sins (Dan 3:37).*

In this dramatic situation, Azariah offers the Lord the only thing he has: *Yet with a contrite heart and a humble spirit may we be accepted (Dan 3:39).* And God accepts this sacrifice, which is the most pleasing one in his eyes: *Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful (Joel 2:12-13).* This interior attitude before God, whom we know we can never repay for all the good He has bestowed on us, is what makes any of our sacrifices pleasing.

AZARIAH has understood God's way of acting. Even in the midst of the flames, his amazement at God's infinite mercy leads him to praise God for all his gifts. Azariah and his companions have experienced what it is like to have nothing and are happy to receive everything from God. And the gratitude of these three young men breaks forth in a song in which they summon all creatures to join them in praising and blessing God's mercy (cf. *Dan* 3:51-90).

That furnace of their exile was, for the people of Israel, the crucible that helped them to return to what is essential. From there opened up a new beginning in which God and his love once again are at the center. *And now with all our heart we follow you; we fear you and seek your presence. Do not put us to shame, but deal with us in your patience and in your abundant mercy. Deliver us in accordance with your marvelous*

works, and bring glory to your name (Dan 3:41-43).

For us too, Lent is an opportunity to start anew. “Human life is in some way a constant returning to our Father’s house,” Saint Josemaría said. “We return through contrition, through the conversion of heart which means a desire to change, a firm decision to improve our lives and which, therefore, is expressed in sacrifice and self-giving.”^[1]

Discovering and following this path back to the Father will fill us with the same joy that filled the hearts of the three young men.

EXPERIENCING God’s forgiveness helps us to escape from our purely human calculations. When Peter asks Jesus how many times he has to forgive his brother, the answer

seems beyond all logic: *Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times* (Mt 18:21-22). And then He tells the parable about a man who had a debt of ten thousand talents, a sum that would have put Solomon himself in difficulty. In the most prosperous times of the kingdom of Israel, the king was said to receive 666 talents of gold each year (cf. 1 Kings 10:14). The poor debtor in the parable must have felt like Azariah, when considering the magnitude of the people's sins and their inability to make amends. As he could not pay, *the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything'* (Mt 18:25-26).

Then Jesus gives the parable a surprising twist: *And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.* The Master teaches us that, just as Azariah had already experienced,

God allows himself to be conquered by a contrite heart. He pours out his grace on seeing our sincere desire to pay, even though we are incapable of doing so. “God never tires of forgiving! It is we who tire of asking for forgiveness.”^[2]

Jesus always forgives us when we approach the sacrament of Confession with sincere repentance. At the same time, knowing that God himself forgets our mistakes encourages us not to give excessive importance to the offenses we may receive from others: “I haven’t needed to learn how to forgive, because God has taught me how to love,”^[3] Saint Josemaría often said. We ask our Lady, refuge of sinners, to teach us to open ourselves to God’s forgiveness; and also to help us to not withhold our forgiveness from those who have hurt us, and to ask for forgiveness frequently.

^[1] Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 64.

^[2] Francis, Angelus, 17 March 2013

^[3] Saint Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 804.

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