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The Fifth Sunday of Lent (C)

The Lord God says to us today: "See, I am doing something new! ... I put water in the desert and rivers in the wasteland for my people to drink, the people whom I formed for myself, that they might announce my praise" (Isaiah 43:19, 20-21). If we are to say with the Psalmist, "The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad indeed," we must first recognize that we do indeed wander through the desert today (Psalm 126:3).

In his inaugural Mass as the Bishop of Rome, Pope Benedict XVI said:

...so many people are living in the desert. And there are so many kinds of desert. There is the desert of poverty ... of hunger and thirst ... of abandonment ... of loneliness, of destroyed love. There is the desert of God' darkness, the emptiness of souls no longer aware of their dignity or the goal of human life. The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast (Homily, Inaugural Mass, April 2005).

If we are honest, each of us will admit that we, too, like the Israelites, wander through a desert and we no longer know where we are going. "We [have] all gone astray like sheep, each following his own way" (Isaiah 53:6).

In our faulty understanding of freedom, we choose our own desires and seek happiness on our own, apart from God and from his will. We have turned true freedom into something rather petty and insignificant, as nothing more than choosing DrPepper or Mr. Pibb, as going for a walk or going for a run. Too often do we forget that freedom must always involve God and his will.

Like Adam and Eve we have each chosen our own way over and against God's, thinking our way will be for us freedom, peace and joy. We are sadly mistaken, though, as we know all too well. The more I follow my own desires and wishes, the less happy I am; the more my own desires are in line with those of God, the happier I am and the greater peace I feel. Even so, the majority of humanity still refuses to listen to Christ and wanders farther and deeper into the vast desert of isolation and sin. This each of us does, but,

"the Son of God will not let this happen; he cannot abandon humanity in so wretched a condition. He leaps to his feet and abandons the glory of heaven, in order to go in search of the sheep and pursue it, all the way to the Cross. He takes it upon his shoulders and carries our humanity; he carries us all - he is the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep (Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, Inaugural Mass, April 2005).

In Christ Jesus, God himself has come to his people, lost and wandering in the desert.

He has established his Cross as "the tree of life that is in the garden of God," and of its fruit each of us may partake when we relinquish our will and follow Christ (Revelation 3:6). This is why Saint Paul says,

I consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him (Philippians 3:8-9).

God has indeed put in our midst "water in the desert and rivers in the wasteland for [his] chosen people to drink" (Isaiah 43:20). When the soldier thrust his lance into the side of the Crucified Savior, blood and water flowed forth, symbolizing the Church and her Sacraments. These waters still gush forth from the side of Christ for his people to drink, to be nourished on their pilgrim journey fraught with difficulties.

This water is given first to us in Baptism, when the Lord frees us from sin and death and clothes us with himself. At the beginning of the Rite of Baptism, the priest traced the Cross on our forehead after saying, "...I claim you for Christ our Savior by the sign of his Cross" (79).

We are longer our own; we belong to Christ. As members of his Body we must seek always to follow wherever he leads, trusting that he knows the way and that he knows what he is doing. He will never lead us astray, nor will he abandon us, even though we stray from him and abandon him. Christ is always faithful!

Saint Paul recognizes that he has been claimed by Christ in Baptism and thus he says:

I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ Jesus. Brothers and sisters, I for my part do not consider myself to have taken possession. Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:12-14).

The task for us during these remaining days of Lent is to cease our aimless wandering through the desert and turn to Christ. He will put us on the path to heaven, if only we let him. True freedom consists in this: in the choice of uniting my will with God's.

Today, the One who is the Living Water bends down to us and whispers our sins to us in the silence of our hearts. As we judge ourselves and condemn ourselves he calls us to meet him in the Sacrament of Penance where his merciful love is constantly offered. Our patron, Saint Anthony of Padua, reminds us:

Confession is also called 'the gate of heaven'... Through it, as through a gate, the penitent is led in to kiss the feet of divine mercy; to be raised up to kiss the hands of heavenly grace; and to be accepted with the kiss ... of fatherly reconciliation... My beloved brothers, be humbled and enter by the gate of confession. As you have been taught, confess your sins and their circumstances, because *now is the acceptable time for confession, now is the day of salvation for making amends* (II Corinthians 6:2).

[First Sunday of Lent 2.19]

Let each of us then approach the Lord in the Sacrament of Mercy and hear him say to us: "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin any more" (John 8:11).