

## SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT, 2023

Today's First Reading, a lesson from chapter 12 of Genesis, gives us three of the most important verses in all the Bible. These verses are the Lord's first call to Abraham. They foreshadow deliberately, in the intention of the inspired human author, the rest of the Torah, the Pentateuch of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These verses also foreshadow providentially, in God's plan, the entire rest of the Bible, including the holy Gospels, and the rest of the New Testament. God makes three promises to Abraham in these verses. God promises that from Abraham will come a great nation. God promises that Abraham will be given a great name. God promises that through Abraham all the peoples of the earth will be blessed. In the "Abrahamic" part of Genesis, chapters 12-24, each of these promises is made into a solemn covenant. In chapter 15, with the physical sacrifice of animals, the Lord swears by Himself- and no oath is more powerful than that - that a great nation will arise from Abraham. This is fulfilled by the formation of Israel. In chapter 17, with Abraham's circumcision, the Lord swears by Himself that Abraham's name will be a great name, a name the Church still recalls during Holy Mass in the "Roman Canon", the First Eucharistic Prayer. In chapter 22, with the spiritual sacrifice of Isaac, the Lord swears by Himself that through Abraham's descendents all the nations of the earth will find blessing. This is fulfilled by the Incarnation, Teaching, Passion, and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, son of Israel and descendent of Abraham, and Lord and Savior of the entire human race.

The Gospel genealogies in Matthew and Luke both show the line of descent from Abraham, our father in Faith, to Jesus Christ, the source and object of our Faith, and the beginning and end of our Faith. The line starts with Abraham, then goes to Isaac, and then to Jacob. Jacob, after his mysterious wrestling with the Lord, is given the new name of Israel, "Strong with God".

According to chapter 25 of Genesis, Jacob had a twin, Esau, who was born immediately before Jacob. As the eldest son, albeit marginally so (Jacob was actually grabbing his heel as he was born), Esau undoubtedly had the birthright to be Isaac's heir. Yet it would be Jacob/Israel who became the heir. Taking a cue from John Henry Newman, I suggest that Esau's loss of his inheritance has something to teach us this Lent.

Chapter 25 of Genesis shows that Esau took his inheritance for granted, and regarded it as a joking matter. On one occasion, when Esau came in hungry from the field and found Jacob cooking, he demanded food. Jacob said that he would give him some right away, in return for his birthright. Esau treated this as a joke, and made a joke. "What good is a birthright anyway, if I die of hunger?" So he told Jacob, in effect, "Fine, you've got my birthright; now, where's the food?" Later on, chapter 27 of Genesis shows Jacob scheming, not at all honorably, to get his inheritance by trickery. Chapters 28-31 of Genesis make it clear that the Lord punished Jacob for his trickery, and disciplined him to grow up into an honest man. These chapters also make it clear that the Lord took care of Esau, who did not do badly. Nevertheless, the Lord also made it abundantly clear that Jacob was, and remained, the rightful heir of the Covenants with Abraham. After Jacob's long and grueling grapple with the Lord, in chapter 32, the Lord made his preference for Jacob clear, giving him the new name of Israel. From Jacob would come the

great nation of Israel. Since, by divine decree, the Savior, as man, would be a son of Israel, the Lord Jesus Christ, God Incarnate, would be Jacob's descendent. Jacob, not Esau, would be the heir of the promises to and covenants with Abraham. Why? Because Jacob had shown in his whole story, including his long wrestle with the Lord, passion and energy; and also because Esau did not take his inheritance seriously.

The Lenten lesson from the story of Jacob and Esau is simply this. As Christians, we are heirs of God's Kingdom. The inheritance of eternal life is ours. That inheritance, however, can be lost, if we don't take it seriously.

Truly, Christians do not lose the inheritance of Heaven merely by sinning gravely. They lose the inheritance of Heaven by not caring that they have sinned gravely. Esau, careless and irreverent, may call for some pity. For admiration, however, the Lord Jesus gives us, in chapter 15 of St. Luke's Gospel, the Prodigal Son. We are not, of course, to admire the Prodigal Son's sins, but we are to admire the way Prodigal Son returns to the Father. Like Esau, he threw away his inheritance. Unlike Esau, he took his sin very seriously, and admitted that he had, in truth, been careless and irreverent. He admitted that he deserved to lose his inheritance. "Father, I have sinned against Heaven and before you, and am no longer worthy to be called your son; let me be one of your hired servants" Esau, although he had carelessly and irreverently sold his heritage for a meal, still expected to receive his father's blessing. The Prodigal Son, in contrast, expected to receive only the hard work and low pay of a household servant (household servants in ancient and medieval times had their room and board guaranteed, not unimportant things, but got no regular wages, only holiday bonuses and gifts). To his shock, Esau, upset but not repentant, did not get his inheritance back. To his shock, the deeply repentant Prodigal Son did get his inheritance back.

From very early times, Holy Church has set aside the weeks before Easter every year as a time especially suited for remembering and confessing our sins. During this time of year, Holy Church has said the same thing to nearly every generation of Christians. Before we celebrate what God has promised us in Christ Jesus, we ought to recall the ways in which we have taken those divine promises lightly, taken them for granted, and perhaps even treated them as a joke.

When we celebrated Christmas and Epiphany, recalling the Lord Jesus' Birth and Baptism, we also celebrated our Baptism, in which we are born again as heirs of the New and Eternal Covenant. When we celebrate the Paschal Triduum of Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday, we will recall solemnly the Lord Jesus' Passion and Resurrection. As we do so, we will also celebrate our invitation to the Eucharistic Sacrifice and Meal, to Holy Mass and Holy Communion, in which we participate, mystically but really, in the Lord Jesus' Sacrifice, and in which we receive Him, mystically but really, as the Food of God's sons and daughters, the Bread of Eternal Life. In between we have Lent, the Sacrament especially suited to the Sacrament of Penance. Lent connects Christmas and Easter. In the same way, the Sacrament of Penance connects Baptism and the Holy Eucharist.

Without our deserving it at all, God has chosen to make us heirs of His Kingdom by Baptism, and to feed us with Heavenly Food in the Holy Eucharist. Dare any of us claim that we have lived up to these privileges? We have taken these divine privileges for granted. In this season of Lent, and in the Sacrament of Penance, we admit this, and receive, with the Prodigal Son, absolution and invitation to the Feast. The Lord has made a Covenant of Eternal Life with us. We have not lived up to that Covenant, but merely admitting that fact opens the way for the Covenant to be joyfully and fully renewed.

When we are comfortable, we most easily forget our heavenly covenant and inheritance. No age is more obsessed with comfort than our own. To us, the Medievals, combining splendid appearance with routine discomfort, seem absurd. To the Medievals we, combining comfort with a cheap and tawdry appearance, would seem absurd. Both we and they need the rebuke of Lent. They needed to be called away from splendid appearances, so as to remember their covenant with God. We need to be called away from our comforts, so as to remember our covenant with God. Lent is supposed to make us uncomfortable.

All of us Moderns, even the most religious, like being comfortable. Nothing, however, is more likely to put us to sleep, and make us fat and lazy, than an obsession with being comfortable. Nothing is more likely to cause us to take the Covenant of Eternal Life lightly than being comfortable. But we love being comfortable.

Oh yes, when I say "We" I definitely include myself in this. I like being comfortable. As a participant in modern civilization, I share our love of being comfortable.

Bodily discomfort is seen by us as a great evil, possibly the greatest, except for mental discomfort. To escape the mental discomfort of being alone with ourselves and our thoughts, we have created history's noisiest civilization (we would hate the Medieval world for its disease inducing dirt; they would hate ours for its craziness inducing noise). At all times and places, we expect to be comfortable, in mind and body.

Seeking always to be comfortable, we come remarkably close to success. We are seldom cold for long, and almost never hungry. We almost all have reasonably pleasant homes, and almost never have experienced physical struggle. Our civilization has been so successful at making life comfortable that we regard "comfortable" as the normal human condition, and assume that "comfortable" will go on forever. It won't, of course. Right now we might be, many of us, as comfortable as olympian gods; but we aren't gods. We are mortals. Discomfort will come upon us. Death will come upon us.

What then?

God has made us a promise about what happens then. He has made a covenant of Eternal Life with us, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Day by day, we forget this glorious covenant of victory over evil and death. Holy Church gives us Lent as a time to remember it, and to try, God helping, to live up to that covenant of love and life. This is the time of year to fast, the topic of

last week's homily. This, especially, is the time of year to spend money and time in service and charity, in ministry and mercy. This is the time to pray more, and to go to parties less. This is the time of year to be less like Esau, caring little about our divine inheritance. This is the time to be more like Jacob, perhaps wrestling with the Lord, but committed and serious.

What God promised through Abraham has been fulfilled. In Abraham's distant heir, Jesus Christ, all the nations of the earth have been blessed. All are called, by Faith, to the Covenant of Eternal Life. Our sins, even our gravest sins, cannot erase that Covenant.

The main thing we have to do is remember the Covenant of Eternal Life. In remembering it, we also remember how we have failed to live up to it. That is a good thing to remember, mentally and even physically. Every night, as part of Compline (Night Prayer), the Church invites us to examine our consciences, and remember our sins. If your body permits, I encourage you, during Lent, to kneel during your nightly examination of conscience. Kneeling, call out, with the Prodigal Son, "I am not worthy to be called your child!" Then, what will the Heavenly Father say?

The Heavenly Father will say "Let us eat, and make merry! For this, my child, was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found!" Then, by God's Grace, we will not be like Esau. We will be like the Prodigal Son. Our inheritance will be restored to us, and we will receive the blessing, foreseen at a great distance by Abraham, but on our lips and in our hearts, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.