

**Fifth Sunday of Lent – Year C**  
**(Mar. 28, 2004)**

Every family has a way of celebrating important events that bring the whole family together, occasions like Baptisms, First Communions, weddings and funerals, events that celebrate who they are as a family. I don't know how your family does these things, but when mine gets together, inevitably the conversation will get around to recalling important moments in the family's past history, especially funny stories about things that happened, stories that we repeat over and over and that seem to get funnier every time they are told. I could give some examples but I don't think they would be quite fitting for this occasion. And, you might be asking yourself just what does this have to do with our homily anyway?

Well, when I first looked at the readings they seemed to be telling us that perhaps this was not quite the proper thing to do. Equivalently they are saying, "Forget the past and push on into the future." In the first reading, God is speaking through the prophet Isaiah to the people of Israel who are in exile in Babylon and God says to the people, "Remember not the events of the past; the things of long ago consider not. See I am doing something new! Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?" What is happening is that a way is being prepared for them to return to their homeland and to a happier future.

Paul writes to the Philippians from prison, facing his own death, and he tells them, "I give no thought to what lies behind but push on to what is ahead."

And when Jesus forgives the woman who is dragged before him in the Gospel story, he tells her, "Go your way and from now on avoid this sin."

And yet how could any of them really forget the past? In the case of the Jewish people in exile, this experience was an important part of their history, second only to the exodus from Egypt and their journey through the desert which they explicitly remember each year when they celebrate the feast of Passover. Paul himself cannot forget his extraordinary encounter with God when he was knocked off his horse on the road to Damascus, an experience that resulted in his conversion. We have three different accounts of it. And besides that he frequently recalls in his

writings the fact that before his conversion he had persecuted the Christians and had actually worked for their extinction. And how could the woman in the Gospel story ever forget how the scribes and Pharisees had humiliated her, making her stand before Jesus and asked if she should be executed. Beyond that how could she forget his gentle words of kindness and forgiveness, words that must have changed her life?

Think, too, of what we do when we come to church to worship our God and share the Eucharist. Like the Jewish people celebrating Passover we remember the good things that God has done for us especially in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and we do this precisely because Jesus has said to us, "Do this in remembrance of me." So when God says, "Remember not the events of the past," this can't possibly mean forget everything. Apparently there are bad things that God wants us to forget, but at the same time there are good things, many good things, that we simply cannot forget.

And even this is not as simple or straight-forward as it sounds. For instance how could the Jewish people of today forget the Holocaust? Or how could we for that matter? If we did it might happen again. Or how could we – or the whole world – forget what happened on September 11, 2001, particularly in light of the hearings that have been going on this past week? Or how could we, as Catholics, forget the pain that we have all felt because of the sexual scandals in the church?

No, I don't think that's what God means. Rather we are being told not to wallow in the misery of bad experiences from the past. I have met many people who have such a sense of guilt about their past sins that they live in a kind of despair thinking that God has not, or cannot, or will not forgive them. We know that can't be true from stories like the one we heard today or last Sunday's Gospel of the Prodigal Son. No, it seems to me we are being told we must get beyond the bad things of the past, no matter how difficult it might be to forget them, and move on with our lives into the future. And we are surely not being told to forget the good things. Indeed our Psalm response says quite the contrary. Over and over we sang, as Mary herself sang, "The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy."

God says, "See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth. Do

you not perceive it?” We live in a world that desperately needs something new. We need hope to push on to what is ahead, as Paul urges. We need conversion and forgiveness in our own lives. We need reconciliation. All of these are available through the love of God, the grace of Jesus, and the strength of the Spirit. If they begin here in our own hearts, then surely there will be a repercussion in the hearts of those around us and eventually beyond us and our little patch to the larger world. Miracles can happen, you know, when we allow God to work as God wants to work in our lives.

Only two weeks are left in Lent until our celebration of the resurrection of Jesus, which is the pledge of our own resurrection. Why not begin to experience that right now, begin already to feel the effects of the resurrection in our own lives? After all God said to all of us, to you and to me, “Behold I am doing a new thing. Now it springs forth.” Actually, in the Christian story, we are the new thing, you and I and all of us. Why don’t we all spring forth together?