

LENT 2018 DURING THE REIGN OF MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL*

A Social Justice Preaching Guide

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Reflections on the Cycle A/Reign of Gabriel readings for the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent follow the Cycle B/Reign of Michael reflections.

ASH WEDNESDAY

During Lent, we are called to repent of sin. Generally, most Catholics attending Mass with some regularity get the point of the call to repentance when they think of sin solely as something personal to themselves. But sin is never solely personal, our sins have a social dimension because they impact our relationships with others. The Church teaches the existence of structures of sin, which rise out of the sins of myriads of people over long periods of time. Laughing at racist jokes, assuming others are inferior, believing “different from us” is somehow wrong or less desirable, acting on those assumptions, using our political influence to distort our economic system to favor those with power and penalize those without access to political power by taking resources from them and giving to those with power, supporting unjust wars – all these are personal sins that create structures of sin that do so much evil in our communities.

Just as we lift others up when we do good, we drag others down when we sin. Which is why during this Lent, all of us need to pay more attention to our participation in the social sins of this community.

(1) Do we welcome migrants with hospitality? Or do we repeat false gossip and react with anger towards migrants and refugees?

(2) Do we use our political system to acquire benefits for ourselves at the expense of others and the common good?

(3) Do we willingly support structures of sin within our communities with our attention, money, time, and effort?

(4) Do we willingly participate in our communities’ persecution of the poor? Or do we speak out against such actions by governments and refuse to support candidates who seek to politically profit from state persecution of the poor?

*For me, the conventional designations for the 3 year lectionary, Cycles A, B, and C, are not poetic enough, so I refer to them as the Reigns of Gabriel, Michael, and Raphael, Archangels. It’s a minor, and hopefully forgivable, liturgical eccentricity.

(5) When our political leaders call us to unjust war, do we enthusiastically participate in this objective evil, or do we resist and work for peace and justice?

As we examine our consciences during Lent, understanding our role in the social sins of this era is important if our goal is to walk with Jesus and follow his example. During his life on earth, he challenged the unjust structures of his own era. His example inspires our own work for justice, peace, reconciliation, and hope for all people.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Reign of Michael/Cycle B

During this cycle of the lectionary, we focus on the gospel of Mark. His was the first gospel to be composed from the oral traditions of Christ's teachings and is often the most succinct in his narrative. The first Sunday of Lent is always about Christ being tempted in the desert. In Mark those temptations are not detailed, but we know there were three from the other Gospels.

The first was a temptation of material things. Christ fasted 40 days. He was hungry! Satan said, "Well, you are the Christ! Turn these stones into bread and have some lunch!" This the temptation of hedonism – seeking personal pleasure above all. How many sins derive from this tendency!. We like our comfort, our nice things, our technology. But we often ignore the inconvenient truth that those nice things may come to us courtesy of the low wage exploitation of workers desperate for work at any price, the rape and despoiling of the natural world, and our hedonism is often driven by greed and lust.

The second temptation was that of egoism. "Look at you," Satan must have said. "Jesus the Christ himself himself. Why don't you just fly up to the top of this tower and jump off and let the angels catch you. Won't the crowds in the Temple below be impressed!" Where does egoism lead us? It calls us to fear of those who are different, it drives five of the seven deadly sins – gluttony, greed, pride, wrath, lust. It has no good outcomes.

The third temptation was that of greed and materialism. Kingdoms! Wealth! Power! "Think of the GOOD YOU COULD DO, JESUS!" Oh yes, this temptation may be the most deadly of all. How easy it is to resort to sin in pursuit of a good goal. Sure, we know that's wrong. But it is so easy, and so tempting, that it's often our first option. So in our politics we turn our backs on the hard issues of poverty, violence against women and children, and structural racism and embrace the easy and ever-popular "get tough on victimless crime" proposals that are not only unjust but also ineffective.

The Gospel ends with a grave injustice – the arrest of John the Baptist – and a proclamation by Jesus – Repent and believe in the Gospel. The kingdom of God is at

hand. Being called to repentance is never popular nor comfortable. It's always easier for the powers that be, and for most of us in our own lives, to kill the messenger. No wonder John the Baptist lost his head, literally, to Herod's fury. Fr. Phillip Berrigan, whose life and ministry was a constant call to repent of the objective evil of unjust war, wrote, "The poor tell us who we are; the prophets tell us who we should be. So we hide the poor and kill the prophets." This is not simply a pious quote, it is a daily reality. Here in Oklahoma City, we are spending a billion dollars downtown, and it certainly looks nice. But that beauty hides the realities of grievous poverty in neighborhoods where we have left people behind for the wolves of life to devour.

These people need charity, sure, in the short term – but more than that, they need justice. They need for the City to stop persecuting them. They need a more just and generous allocation of City resources so that we spend less on the wealthy and powerful and more on those who are in need – investments in infrastructure that empower people to participate in their own lives and work at jobs that pay just wages. This starts with better bus service and continues on through slashing government regulations that prevent people from starting microenterprises that with time and work could grow into full time jobs. Detractors of the social teachings of the Catholic Church often say that it is a liberal plot of some sort. But its really about opening opportunity for all – clearing away obstacles to work and enterprise.

So shall we repent and believe in the Gospel? Should we start living as though the Kingdom of God is a reality right here and right now? How does that change the way we live, shop, work, and vote?

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

Reign of Michael/Cycle B

What we see is not always what is. We come here to Mass, we receive the Body and Blood of Christ, we join together in community – but do we really understand what is happening? Is Communion just a piece of bread and a sip of wine? Is community nice dinners and hugs at the exchange of peace? Is Mass something more than a boring sermon, readings, and hopefully some nice music?

Who was Jesus? A peasant prophet in ancient times? A social justice zealot? Something of both?

Today's Gospel suggests something more, much more. Through the Transfiguration, we come to understand that what we can see, feel, hear, and taste with our physical senses is not all that is. We are embedded in a supernatural reality that is every bit as real as the pews you are sitting on, the breakfast you ate this morning, and the house or apartment where you live.

Today's reading is a call to wake up out of apathy and routine and understand that the Gospels and the ministry of Jesus are not just pious tales handed down from our ancestors which we can use as comfort in time of need. No, this is God himself himself! Speaking to us here and now! What did the voice of God say that day on the mountain? "This is my beloved son. Listen to him." What did Mary say at the miracle at Cana, where Jesus changed the water into wine? She said to the servants – "Do whatever he tells you!"

The story recounted in the first reading is one of those difficult passages from the Old Testament. Clearly it is a test of obedience from a culture foreign to us in our modernity. But the lesson is clear in both the first reading and the Gospel. Obedience to the Word is required! That's part of the reason for Lent. Now is the time to examine your conscience regarding your personal sin and your participation in, and profiting from, the social sins of our day. Are you raising up yourself and those who are around you, in your own personal Transfiguration? Or are you dragging yourself and your community down by clinging to your sins as if they have something good to do for you and those you love.

No one is an island. No one exists only for himself or herself. We often feel that we do, but that's the temptations of hedonism, egoism, and materialism that we learned about last week on the First Sunday of Lent. The Transfiguration of Jesus is call to joyful triumph and obedience to Christ's call that bursts forth in the way we live our lives!

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Reign of Michael/Cycle B

We want to think of Jesus as the Easter Bunny. Nice, clean, pink, and non-threatening. We don't like to think about the Jesus depicted into today's Gospel, who charges into the social and economic situation of his time and literally turns the tables over, smashing into the situation, driving out those who were doing evil.

The Temple was big business in Jerusalem. Besides the Roman government, it was one of the largest economic enterprises in town. The Torah had strict laws about the suitability of animals for sacrifices and over time, a certain corruption had crept in. Suppose you are a family from the provinces, making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to do a religious duty. Perhaps you brought an animal with you. But all animals brought to the Temple were inspected. If a flaw was found, the animal as not suitable for the Temple, and you would have to buy an animal from one of the merchants at the Temple. Perhaps you wanted to give an offering of money, but all you had was Roman coin. Bankers at the Temple would exchange it for the Temple coin that was acceptable. Since these merchants had monopolies, prices were high. Further, the sacrifice at the Temple was generally not a holocaust, where the animal carcass was consumed entirely by fire. It was more like a barbecue, with the meat going to feed the priests and any excess was available to the public at Temple restaurants.

Jesus' direct challenge to this economic power house was a significant factor in his unpopularity with the Temple priests and others who profited from corruption. But it made him popular with those who were the victims of the economic extortion practiced in the name of God.

In the second reading, Paul writes of the foolishness of the Gospel confounding the wisdom of men. There are any number of political and economic authorities these days who assure us that the economic corruption so prevalent in modern life is necessary for prosperity. Poor people should be punished for their poverty, they say, that way they will learn that poverty is not a good idea, and they will work harder to get out of poverty. Such cruelty ignores that many people are poor because of the economic corruption of this era. We often tell the poor to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps." But the bootstraps of our grandparents are no more. It's not possible to set up a table top shop on a sidewalk. You can't sell hot dogs to the public unless you have an expensive, inspected commercial kitchen. You can't ride a cheap trolley or bus to work because at least here in OKC, most jobs aren't accessible by the bus, and riding it isn't cheap. Oklahoma City is actually proposing to raise bus fares on those least able to bear the cost, and their consultants say that 5% of bus riders will drop out of the system, left behind to be devoured by the wolves of economic life.

The first reading gives us the Ten Commandments. In their day, they were radical for the institution of the Sabbath and the demand that parents be honored and protected by their children. Since then, an ocean of ink has been expended that proves that these commandments don't really mean what they say. "Do not kill" doesn't mean "do not kill." We don't know what it really means, but given the realities of modern life, it obviously doesn't mean "do not kill." And resting on the Sabbath? What a quaint idea. We demand entertainment on the Sabbath, and for our convenience, we require that people must work so that we can rush from Holy Mass to work for our entertainment, and to sell us what we want to buy.

Although the crowds in Jerusalem were amazed by his miracles, Jesus did not turn himself over to them. He knew the fickle nature of popular applause. The same people who crowded about him would eventually chant "Crucify him, Crucify him" before Pilate. Are we really so different in our own time? How often do we rush from worshiping Christ at Mass to crucifying him in the marketplace?

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Cycle B/Reign of Michael

This is the Sunday of "you reap what you sow."

Consider the history of the ancient Hebrews. They were enslaved in Egypt, and by mighty wonders, God led them out of slavery into freedom. He sent a pillar of fire by

night, and a pillar of cloud by day to feed them. He parted the Red Sea so they could escape the Egyptian Army that was pursuing them. And they complained. So he sent manna every morning, and when they complained again, he sent quail. Then they were thirsty, and complained about that, so God told Moses to strike a rock and pure water gushed forth. They witnessed the appearance of God to Moses, if remotely, on Mount Sinai and the giving of the Ten Commandments, and crafted a golden calf and worshiped it. They established themselves in the land of Canaan, and prospered under the Judges, prophets anointed by God for leadership. And still they complained, they wanted a king so they could be like their neighbors. Samuel warned them as to what a king would do, but they would not listen, so God gave them kings.

And still they went away from God. You can read the denunciations of the prophets of Israel against the wickedness of the people of Israel and their government, throughout the prophetic writings of the Old Testament. Much of this wickedness centered around the persecution of the poor by the rich. The Law of Moses had strict rules requiring that the poor were to be treated fairly and with justice. Those laws were ignored more often than observed, judging by the words of the prophets.

Sooner or later, you reap what you sow. What goes around, comes around. One day the people of Jerusalem woke up and a foreign army surrounded their city. Four years of siege resulted before the city fell. Parents roasted and ate their children and when the children were gone, the parents died of starvation. The book of Lamentations is all about this. So it came to pass that Jerusalem was destroyed and its people carried away into captivity. Effectively, by their disobedience, they chose defeat, destruction, and captivity.

Yet, God in his mercy did not forget them. He brought redemption to ancient Israel, and through Christ, he brings mercy and redemption to us. None of this we deserve, it is a free gift from God. But in spite of all this mercy, over and over throughout history, we turn away. People prefer darkness to light. We profit from oppressing the poor in our own day. It's good for business. We prefer the darkness because our works are evil – we are guilty of personal sin, and our personal sins are the foundation of much social evil.

There are no good outcomes from the works of darkness. We must not only see the light, the Gospel today tells us we must live the light. As we live the light, we lift up ourselves and all around us. Structures of sin become structures of beauty and wisdom. It is evident that we can't do these things of ourselves, our personal relationship with Christ is the source of light in our lives.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Cycle B/Reign of Michael

We don't seem to be hearing much about the safe Jesus this Lent, you know, the one who

hangs on a properly gilded cross bought at a store, who doesn't trouble us with demands. This Sunday he comes to us talking about his own death, and saying things that are totally contrary to the therapeutic mores of our modernity. If we want to save our lives, we must lose them? If we love our lives, we will lose them, but if we hate our lives, we will preserve them? Whoever serves me, must follow me?

What kind of message is that? It wasn't popular 2,000 years ago, and its not popular today. This Jesus just refuses to stay safe in our beautiful Tabernacles, body, blood, soul, and Divinity. No, he keeps on crashing out into real life, disrupting routines, confounding the wise, uprooting the powerful, comforting the afflicted, and afflicting the comfortable. And then he says things like "follow me, do likewise."

How can we do that in our own time? Wouldn't that be risky? Will people look askance at us if we actually start following Christ and living as though the Kingdom of God was a reality right now? Loving our neighbor – even those in the other political party? Doing good to our enemies in Syria, and Libya, and Yemen, and Iraq, Afghanistan and the 74 other countries where we are presently fighting enemies? Jesus says he was troubled. We say we are troubled if we are expected to do all of this. How is that possible?

There's an old hymn, "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, Look full in His wonderful face, And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, In the light of His glory and grace." Of course in our own strength we can't rise above our sin! But equally of course, by focusing our eyes – our attention – our heart – upon Jesus, we become converted! We are born again! When we fall, we repent, go to confession, and do penance. Rinse and repeat.

Jeremiah in today's first reading, writing to Israel in Exile, tells of a future of Messianic glory, where not only the people of Israel, but the whole planet and all people are redeemed. Righteousness is the rule, not evil. All will know the Lord, who does not remember our sins.

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Year A/Reign of Gabriel

The ancient Hebrews were complainers. They were a lot like us in that regard. They were enslaved in Egypt, and by mighty wonders, God led them out of slavery into freedom. He sent a pillar of fire by night, and a pillar of cloud by day to feed them. He parted the Red Sea so they could escape the Egyptian Army that was pursuing them. And they complained. So he sent manna every morning to feed them, and when they complained again, he sent quail. Then they were thirsty, and complained about that, so God struck the rocks and pure water gushed forth. That's what we're reading about today. The lesson of this reading is emphasized in the psalm antiphon: If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts. In other words, when God does something nice for you, don't turn around and treat him poorly.

Meanwhile, Jesus and his disciples are out traipsing across the countryside, which was notable for its lack of amenities like convenience stores and drinking fountains. They came to a well, and Jesus stayed there while the disciples went to fetch food from town. Then a crack dealing prostitute came to get water at well. Actually, the Gospel said “Samaritan”, but that’s about what Jews thought of the Samaritans. The appropriate thing for a Jew to do in such a situation was to ignore the Samaritan as beneath his dignity. Plus, besides being a Samaritan, this was a WOMAN. Well! We can’t be talking to strange women can we?

But that’s exactly what Jesus did! He asked her for a drink – thus running the risk of becoming ritually impure by touching an outcast like this. The woman is shocked! She says “I am amazed you are asking me for a drink!” Then Jesus says, “If you knew who I am, you would ask me for water and I would give you living water.”

This woman is no fool. Carrying water was women’s work in those days, and imagine how much trouble it would be to walk say a mile and carry all the water your household would use in a day, in big jugs, back to your house. She was ready for piped in running water, you betcha. As their conversation progresses, Jesus reveals more – he knows she has had five husbands and was presently living with someone, not her husband. So if she wasn’t a drug dealer, she obviously had some loose morals, although here again, we maybe should resist the urge to be too condemnatory because then and now, a single woman, without support, is at risk of predators and worse.

Jesus goes on to announce himself as the Messiah – not in a glorious assembly in Jerusalem, but in a poverty-stricken rural area, and not to wise leaders and economic titans, but to a woman of a despised race and culture. When the disciples get back, creatures of their time, they are Shocked. Shocked I say. Jesus is talking to a Samaritan! A WOMAN!

Meanwhile, the woman runs to town and tells everyone. She immediately becomes one of the first evangelizers – before most of the apostles really understood what was going on, she got it. She had a relationship with Christ, and she wanted to share that with her neighbors. And let’s assume she wasn’t overly popular? Most small towns are somewhat rigid in rejecting people who don’t quite fit in. And a woman who has had five husbands and was presently cohabitating was probably not fitting in. But her story was so compelling, they listened, they came, and they were converted. And then Jesus spent TWO DAYS with them, living with them, eating and drinking with them, breaking all kinds of Jewish purity rules and cultural practices in the process.

This is what conversion is all about. It may not happen suddenly like this, it may evolve over a period of days, months, or years, but there comes a moment when your relationship with Christ flourishes with joy and activity. You go and share the good news. You break out of social evils. You open your door to people of other races, creeds, and colors. You turn your back on politicians who preach hate and divisions.

In the second Reading, Paul writes of the peace and the hope that comes from conversion in Christ. When the love of God is poured out into our hearts, even when we are helpless and ungodly, mercy triumphs! God proved his love for us, in that before we were good, while we were sinners, Christ willingly died for us.

Drink deeply today of the living waters gushing forth from the rock, the water which cleanses and liberates, which quenches our spiritual thirsts and becomes a spring of water, welling up to eternal life.

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Cycle A/Reign of Gabriel

Previously, Samuel had warned the people of Israel about the dangers of kings. They didn't listen to him, so he chose Saul to be king who went on to prove Samuel right about most of his warnings. So God sent Samuel to choose a new king. He goes to a rural area, and meets the family of Jesse, who introduces him to seven of his sons, but none of them are the one chosen by God. Jesse says he has one more son, who's out with the sheep. When he arrives, God tells Samuel – "this is the one!" God sees into David's heart and knows his future, even though he is likely only a teenager.

In Bible days, it was generally believed that if you had a grievous problem like blindness, it was because of something that you, or someone in your family, did. Not knowing anything about the germ theory of disease, they assumed sin as the source of the physical afflictions of the time. Such was the case of this man born blind. He was a beggar because that was all he could do. He lived on the charity of others.

Upon encountering him, Jesus uses the social situation as an occasion of teaching. He practices a bit of the folk medicine of the day, and sends him to a pool, reputed to be a place of healing, to wash his eyes. So it comes to pass that his sight is given to him.

Obviously, this was a transgression of the social customs of the day. Blind people are beggars, they don't get healed by itinerant prophets from hick towns, they deserve what happens to them. Jesus and his talk of being the light of the world is obviously a trouble maker and the rulers intended to do something about this. So they questioned this man and his parents, threatening them with expulsion from their community,

The rulers first decide to deny that this guy was ever blind. That was much easier than figuring out what was done. But too many people had seen this guy, for too long, for that to get much traction. The fall back story is that Jesus is obviously evil. But that's weak too. How can an evil person do such a powerful miracle?

This gospel concludes with a warning. Jesus says he, the Light of the World, has come so that those who are blind could see, while those who see would be made blind.

The spiritual implications of this are obvious. In our natural state, we are blinded by our sin. We cannot see God, wisdom, beauty. We think that the only existence is the present world that we can experience with our five human senses.

When Christ, the light of world, comes into our lives, our spiritual optic nerves are restored, we see the supernatural reality that infuses all that is, and that changes everything. That's what conversion is all about. Opening our eyes so we see what is really there. That's how we can love our enemies, and even do good to them. That's how we can seek to change human structures of sin, and replace them with divine structures of beauty, wisdom, and justice. We do that by the way we live our lives. If we want love, we are called to love. If we want beauty, we are called to be beautiful. If we want justice, we must live in justice. None of this is the least bit obvious until the Light of Christ comes to us and takes away our spiritual blindness. When that happens, all of this becomes obvious.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Year A/Reign of Gabriel

This is a Sunday of life, of resurrection, anticipating as we draw close to the end of Lent the joys of the Resurrection.

The Bible teaches that we are dead in our sins. It's been said that Original Sin is the one doctrine of Christianity for which there is empirical evidence. We see that proof every day on the evening news and in the morning paper. We see it in our own lives as we deal with our own sins of selfishness, greed, lust, and pride. The Prophet Ezekial was the first Prophet called by God after Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians, the book of Ezekial presents that destruction as the judgement of God upon the violent injustices and idolatry of the inhabitants. Ezekial saw the spirituality reality of his his people in a vision of a valley full of dead, dry bones, a representation of the death of the people of Israel. But even in their punishment, God's mercy comes to them, and Ezekial sees the bones acquire flesh and skin, restored as a whole people, obedient this time to God's word, just in their relationships to all, a people who no longer persecute and oppress the poor.

Today's Gospel, penned by John the Evangelist, is notable for its careful attention to detail and the human touches placed in the narrative by the author. Jesus was as human as he was divine, and so it should not be a surprise to learn that Lazarus was his friend, and his sisters, Mary and Martha, were particularly close to the Lord. It is notable that the writers of the Gospels, contrary to the literary conventions of the day, not only mention women throughout their narratives, but they are give names to many of them. From its earliest days, Christianity was subverting the status quo, bringing life to old dead bones, disrupting the demons who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls.

So it comes to pass that we experience the grief of the family, the sorrow of the mourners

who came to visit them, the confusion of those closest to Jesus about why he didn't hurry there quickly when word was first brought of Lazarus' illness. We are there, with them, at every development of the story.

This gospel passage is famous for the shortest verse in the Bible, "Jesus wept," where the human nature of Jesus comes front and center and we feel, with him, the deep emotional grief of the loss of someone close to him and dear to his heart. So he prays and commands that the stone be rolled away. Martha, ever the practical one, protests! "Lord, it's been FOUR DAYS! It will stink! Don't you know that?"

We in our sin are like Lazarus in his tomb. We are just laying there in the darkness, slowly decaying, falling back into the natural world, our sins releasing a stench of decay that is inherently repulsive and causes people to draw away. But like Lazarus, we are susceptible to resurrection! Through our belief in Jesus, the way and the life, we find the door to eternal life. When Jesus said "Lazarus come forth," he was speaking to all of us, all throughout time, calling us out of our tombs of darkness and death, so that we can walk in the light and live as children of light. This is what conversion is all about. From darkness comes light, from light comes the ability to walk confidently in a world that we see is illuminated by spiritual light.

So with the psalmist we can sing, with hope and confidence – "with the Lord there is mercy, and fullness of redemption."