

3rd Sunday of Lent (C)
(Exodus 3:1-8.13-15 / Luke 13:1-9)
28.02.2016
God's Name is Mercy

Today in our first reading we heard the account of one of the major steps in the relationship between God and his people. God reveals his name to Moses. In the ancient world a name was more than a verbal symbol; it was believed to have a genuine relation to the reality to which it was attached; to know the name of a reality gave power over it.

However in the case of God, in no way are Moses and the people left with the impression that they have power over him. The fact that the three consonants cannot be pronounced is a perpetual reminder of the otherness of God.

"I am who I am" seems quite a straightforward translation. However the Hebrew text is more challenging, it could be read: "I will be what I will be", the Greek translation of the Old Testament is: "I am he who is" and for the 1st century Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, God says: "I am the Being" (*Life of Moses*, 1:75).

What a strange name which states the existence of God, his being present to his people! The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber translates the verse as follows: "I will be present as the one who will be there" (quoted in Kasper, *Mercy*, p. 47).

The point is that God reveals himself as a presence. And here the temptation will always be for us to turn God's presence into an overpowering, judgemental and inquisitive presence. God becomes a kind of big brother towering over us, one whose presence is an intrusion into our lives and a curb to our freedom.

We may go even as far as the Jews of Jesus' time, as we heard in our Gospel reading, and believe that God causes a tower to fall or is responsible for a mass killing so that sinners may be punished. Regularly we hear Christians linking suffering and sin, explaining a natural disaster by the sinfulness of the inhabitants of the area.

The Jewish tradition constantly challenged this conception a God.

According to Abraham Heschel, to the question: "What is God to you? There is only one answer that survives all theories which we carry to the grave: He is full of compassion. The Tetragrammaton, the great Name, we do not know how to pronounce, but we are taught to know that it stands for: 'compassion'." There is an old rabbinic doctrine that the Tetragrammaton, usually rendered by "the Lord", expresses the divine attribute of love. (*Man is not Alone*, p. 148)

Pope Francis reminds us of this truth with his last book whose title is: *The Name of God is Mercy*.

However if God is only mercy, love and compassion in himself, this may be an interesting piece of information on the identity of God but it has no impact on our lives.

What is important, what we must start from is God's amazing, unbounded love, compassion and mercy towards each one of us, given generously to each one as if they were given to nobody else. We spoke of the revelation of the Name of God to Moses as a major step in the history of the people of Israel. A definitive and unsurpassable step happens with Jesus Christ: the mount of Horeb is surpassed by the Mount of Golgotha and the revelation of the amazing love of God visible in the life, death and Resurrection of his beloved Son.

Unlike Moses who has to cover his face, afraid to look at God, for our part on the face of Christ, we see all the mercy and the compassion that God has in store for us.

Because of his mercy, God says to Moses: “I am well aware of the sufferings of my people. I mean to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians and bring them out of that land to a land rich and broad.”

The Lord wants to accomplish the same thing for us today. He is aware of our sufferings and he means to deliver us out of the hands of all that oppresses us.

God, in his love and mercy for each one of us, is aware how much we are crippled, held prisoners, stopped in our growth by our fears, our refusal to forgive, our greediness, the hardness of our hearts, our pride, our self-sufficiency and our self-centredness.

The call to repentance which is an essential aspect of our Lenten journey is a beautiful sign of God’s hope, patience and mercy towards us. If God were to stop calling us to repentance that would mean that he has given up on us; that would also mean that he rejects his own identity, which is quite absurd!

The call to conversion should help us to have a glimpse of the depth of God’s desire for us to be freer and more truly alive.

However we are not dealing here only with our relationship with God. We are supposed to become merciful as our heavenly Father is merciful. So we have to ask ourselves whether or not what we say and do helps others to grow in freedom and in life.

All that we undertake during this Lenten season, all the efforts we make in regard to our spiritual life, will be fruitful only if they are inspired and sustained by the kind of mercy which comes from God and which bears the features of our loving Lord.

Ultimately, we are not talking only of accomplishing acts of mercy here and there, according to our mood or circumstance but about becoming merciful, so full of mercy that our whole lives participate in the work of the new creation in Christ.

Mercy alone can change our lives and the world, mercy alone can attune them to the love song of the Father. Around us, in our families, in politics and in our Churches, we know that without mercy, no zeal, no doctrine, no work, no sacrifice has in it the savour and the power of life.

The Lord reminds Moses: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be their slaves no more; I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect” (Lev 26:13). Giving thanks for the mercy of God which sets us free, may we, in our turn be merciful and help one another to walk erect in freedom of heart.