



## Tuesday of the 2nd Week of Lent



**Date:** Tuesday, March 18, 2025 | **Season:** Lent | **Year:** C

**First Reading:** Isaiah 1:10, 16–20

**Responsorial Psalm:** Psalm 50:8–9, 16b–17, 21, 23 | **Response:** Psalm 50:23b

**Gospel Acclamation:** Ezekiel 18:31

**Gospel Reading:** Matthew 23:1–12

**Preached at:** the Chapel of the Most Holy Name, Kolvenbach House in the Archdiocese of Lusaka, Zambia.

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There is a temptation, ancient as the dawn and subtle as a whisper, to believe that righteousness is a matter of appearances, that justice can be performed by proxy, that faithfulness is measured in ritual rather than relationship. It is a temptation that Isaiah decries, that the Psalmist laments, and that Jesus Himself denounces with piercing clarity. And yet, it is a temptation as old as Israel and as modern as today’s headlines.

Isaiah, the prophet who dared to speak truth to kings, addresses the rulers of Sodom and the people of Gomorrah—not literal Sodom and Gomorrah, but Israel herself, which had become, in its injustice and infidelity, indistinguishable from those cities of ruin. “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; cease to do evil, learn to do good.” The words cut through pious pretensions like a sword. The prophet does not demand greater sacrifice, nor more scrupulous observance of ritual. He demands conversion. A heart washed, not hands rinsed. A life redirected, not a ceremony perfected. And how urgent that call remains today, as we witness the cycle of violence and retribution tearing apart the Holy Land—the very soil where these words were first spoken. The prophet’s cry is not for vengeance, nor for the triumph of one side over another, but for justice, for mercy, for peace that can only be built upon truth and righteousness.

The Psalm echoes this same divine critique. “I do not rebuke you for your sacrifices,” says the Lord, “but to the wicked God says: ‘Why do you recite my statutes, and profess my covenant with your mouth, while you hate discipline and cast my words behind you?’” It is a stinging rebuke against those who have mastered the language of faith but ignored its demands. Faith is not an ornament. It is not a performance. It is a fire that refines the soul, a truth that must be lived or else it becomes a lie.

And then comes Jesus in the Gospel, standing before the scribes and Pharisees, before the pious and powerful, before those who had made a fortress of their own righteousness. He does not dismiss the law. He does not abolish the seat of Moses. But He exposes the hypocrisy of those who wielded faith as a means of status rather than service. “They tie up heavy burdens, hard to carry, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them.” What good is a law if it is devoid of love? What is the weight of an obligation without the wings of mercy? The greatness of the kingdom of God is not found in the height of one’s stature, but in the depth of one’s humility: “The greatest among you must be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

Jesus also warns, “You must call no one on earth your father, since you have only one Father, and he is in heaven.” This is not a condemnation of the affectionate or spiritual use of ‘father,’ but a rejection of the hierarchical structures of power and domination that so often distort true authority. In Jesus’ time, ‘father’ signified more than familial relationship—it evoked the patriarchal systems in place that controlled, dictated, and wielded power. Jesus upends this, calling His followers to recognize a deeper kinship, one not defined by social status or privilege but by mutual service and shared dignity. Pope Francis often reminds us of the interconnectedness of all people and all creation, calling us to cultivate right relationships—with God, with one another, and with the earth itself. True leadership, whether in the Church or in the world, is not about domination but about fostering a fraternity that heals and uplifts.

This is the paradox of the Gospel, the great reversal that shatters our illusions of power. It is the same truth that animated the life of St. Cyril of Jerusalem, whose feast we mark today. Cyril was born around 315 to Christian parents in or near Jerusalem. As a priest, he was entrusted with the catechesis of those preparing for baptism, and his Catechetical Instructions—nineteen given before baptism in the Church of the Holy Cross and five given after in the Church of the Resurrection—remain a profound and complete explanation of the Catholic faith. He became bishop of Jerusalem around 350, inheriting a city divided by theological conflict, particularly the Arian heresy, which denied Christ’s divinity. For his steadfast defense of the Nicene faith, that is, that Christ is the true Son of God and is of the same nature as the Father, Cyril was exiled three times, spending sixteen of his thirty-five years as bishop in banishment. Yet, he endured with

humility and unwavering faith. In 381, he played a key role in the Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople, helping to reaffirm the true nature of Christ. His life was not marked by ambition but by service, by teaching, by the quiet yet unyielding proclamation of Christ crucified and risen. For this, Pope Leo XIII declared him a Doctor of the Church in 1882.

And so we stand, in this season of Lent, once again confronted by the age-old challenge of true conversion. In Zambia today, as in every corner of the world, there are those who wear the outward signs of faith but turn a deaf ear to the cries of the poor. Injustice persists, not by necessity, but by convenience, serving the interests of a few at the expense of the many. How tragic it is that some who once answered the sacred call to serve as priests now pursue political power, while clinging to the title of ‘Father.’ They seek influence, yet fail to embody the selfless service the title demands. Priesthood is not a transient role, nor a title to be claimed at will—it is a sacred vocation, a lifelong commitment to serving Christ and His people. To abandon the altar for the podium, to trade the Gospel for political ambition, is to misunderstand the essence of priesthood. Jesus warns us against those who seek to exalt themselves rather than humbly serve, distorting the trust entrusted to the priestly calling. The kingdom of God is not built on political power but on the enduring strength of selfless love and humble service.

Yet, we must also be vigilant against a more insidious danger—the temptation for bishops to become too entangled in partisanship, to allow political alliances to shape their pastoral mission rather than the Gospel of Christ. When shepherds forget that their flock includes the whole Church, not just those who share their political sympathies, they risk becoming little more than ideologues in mitres. The Church’s voice must always be prophetic, not partisan; a voice that calls all to conversion, rather than one that echoes the slogans of any passing regime. True leadership in the Church is not about aligning with power but standing for truth, even when that truth is inconvenient or costly.

But Lent is not a season of vague regret. It is not about feeling bad for forty days and then returning to old habits. It is about transformation. It is about the courage to become what we profess to be. The Society of Jesus has always stood in the breach, challenging the comfortable and comforting the afflicted. What will that look like in our time and place? In our schools and missions? In our homes and our communities?

This is not a rhetorical question. It is the question upon which eternity hinges. And so, as we enter into the silence of prayer, and while we pray for Pope Francis' recovery as we walk this Lenten road together, let us ask ourselves:

- Where in my life have I substituted the appearance of holiness for the reality of conversion?
- Who in my community carries burdens that I have the power to lighten, if only I would take them upon myself?
- How is God calling me, in this Lent, to humble myself that I might truly serve, not seeking to be great, but seeking to love?

Let us not leave these questions unanswered. For the time of mercy is now, the call to justice is here, and the One who is both Lord and Servant walks beside us, inviting us ever deeper into His love.

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