

1923

Midday Prayers - 849

8.3.82

28.2.91

Loney Heaven (Bib. U. No. 1°)

Pas Cruces Tuar (Novela)

LENT PREFACE

(Nissa, Pille 2°)

There's a marvellous variety in the readings of ^{in the calendar of the Roman Cath. Church} scripture chosen specially for each week-day Mass during Lent. Some of the choices, and the particular days on which they're read, have a very long history of association with ^{the season of} Lent, for they were carefully chosen in keeping with the educational process of these 40 days, the instruction and catechesis of those who were to be baptised at the Easter baptismal festival. And for the most part, the O.T. selections make interesting contrasts or complements to the gospel readings... Altogether, a rich diet of biblical instruction, and food for meditation, reflection and prayer, in this ^{traditional} season of fasting and penance, if you follow these daily readings. And if you do, and have done over a number of years, you'll probably have got yourself a few familiar favourites, like the Mondays of the 3rd or the 5th weeks, maybe. But it was one of last week's happy choices that I want to start with today: the story of Jonah's preaching of repentance and its immediate effect, and then the reference Jesus made to this O.T. story. He said, you remember: 'This is an evil age. It seeks a sign. But no sign will be given it except the sign of Jonah. Just as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be a sign for the present age.... At the judgement, the citizens of Nineveh will rise along with the present generation, and they will condemn it. For at the preaching of Jonah they reformed, but you have a greater than Jonah here.' The point of this "sign" is that it's not some kind of miracle, such as Jesus' incredulous hearers wanted as some kind of proof: it's that doing s'th. about the Word of God is what counts, & brings salvation. 'To hear the word of God and keep it.' Jesus was announcing the Kingdom of

God at hand, asking people (and that's us too) to repent, to reform. If you think you know all the answers, you'll be looking for signs and miracles, instead of listening and acting accordingly. For the pagan people of the Assyrian city of Nineveh, Jonah was a complete stranger come from afar, with a message from his God whom they didn't know. Yet, they did listen and did repent, spectacularly, as you can read in the short Bk of Jonah. And they believed. Jonah had given them 40 days to repent, before their city would be destroyed by the wrath of God — one day was enough. We are given 40 days as well, this time of Lent, for penance, fasting, alms, prayer — not with the wrath of God hanging over us, but so as to enter more deeply and more fully into the joy and the life of Christ's resurrection. We still have to listen, and to do God's word — that's the invitation and message of Lent. But God is gracious and full of mercy, slow to anger: His Lent is His mercy to us, too — not something to be taken for granted, but to learn to appreciate and to share, to show to others that mercy which we ourselves know we have received in the forgiveness of our sins, in the acceptance into the Kingdom and family of God, in the faith that God has given us: all of this is in the meaning of our baptism that we recall in these days, and will renew at Easter. And so we come back to the Bk of Jonah, which is really a story (or two stories) with a novel and a message — that God's mercy has no limit, certainly not one that we could put on it, as we so often want to do. His mercy covers everybody, strangers, other people even those who don't recognise Him for who He is. No limit: but no force either — repent and believe the Word of God. Think about it awhile now, as we listen to this prayer in music, "N. serene"

DEC. 8. 2059 (have mercy, Lord) in the Allegri MUSIC-PRAYERS.

2³

version that was v. popular
some yrs ago

There is a twist to the Jonah

story, of course, that I haven't mentioned yet — Jonah's anger and frustration when the people of Nineveh did listen & repent. Here he was, unwillingly given this mission to preach that God's wrath would come down on Nineveh's people in 40 days unless they listened. He must have thought they wouldn't, or was so fascinated by the images of fire and destruction and anger that he couldn't believe that God is really merciful. Anyway, it was he who got angry and resentful and frustrated when his preaching worked: he thought he was a failure, that God was being unfair to him. And he had to be reminded, in his sulking in the shade of his vine-tree, that he had received God's mercy, and had no reason to begrudge the same divine mercy being given to others too. In his rebellious sulking outside the city of Nineveh, still hoping to see the destruction he'd foretold, Jonah has to realise that he's in that state for all the wrong reasons — he's there just because the Lord has been merciful, and he's blinded by his own resentment. The message of the Bk. underlines the Lord's concern for people, for all people, for the least intelligent of them, and for the dumb beasts as well. Jonah is a satire on narrow-mindedness, on all who want to put limits on God's freedom, who receive His mercy but do not want to (or perhaps do not know how to) give. He is a sign, too, of the Lord's patience with the stupidest and most wrong-headed things we do. Learn from Jonah, from how people listened to him, and from what the Lord had to teach him. And know that a greater than Jonah is here.