

The beginning of today's first reading might not have sounded familiar, but it should have looked familiar. Moses spoke to the people, saying: "The priest shall receive the basket from you and shall set it in front of the altar of the LORD, your God." That exact same thing happens at every Sunday Mass. It also happens during Daily masses in a modified form. The collection basket, the bread, and the wine are brought forward by representatives of the people. They are placed into the hands of the priest who either hands them to the deacon and servers or takes them himself and places them in front of the altar or on the altar. The rest of the first reading tells why the Israelites did that and why we still do it.

Moses told the people to declare before the Lord, "My father was a wandering Aramean" who ended up in Egypt where he and his descendants suffered greatly until they were rescued by the lord. The wandering Aramean is most likely a reference to the patriarch Jacob who served his father-in-law Laban in the land of Aram; it can also be applied more generally to Jacob's father and grandfather Isaac and Abraham—Abraham is referred to in the First Eucharistic prayer as our father in faith. Hopefully we are all familiar with how Jacob's son, Joseph, ended up in Egypt and the events that led up to and followed his arrival there. If you aren't, then read Genesis and Exodus to see how God rescued the Hebrews from slavery. Notice also told the people to offer their firstfruits. The offering wasn't just a bunch of fruit they picked up off the ground, it was the first fruit, the first crop they produced. If you were living before supermarkets and superhighways, giving away your first produce could mean starvation if the crops then failed. The offering of the basket was an act of gratitude by the Israelites in recognition of everything God had done for them and it was an act of faith that he will continue to look after them.

How does this connect to ourselves? God made the descendants of Abraham into a great nation. He raised up those poor nomadic shepherds and eventually gave them the promised land flowing with milk and honey. Did it cost God anything to do that? Choosing Abraham and his children to be his people was an act of love by God and the scriptures speak of the "pain" he endured when his people broke the covenants he established with them, but we can't really measure that act of love in terms of material costs.

What about us though? The Israelites inherited a geographical promised land, aside from some frustration, it didn't really "cost" God anything to give it to them. That land flowing with milk and honey was an earthly foreshadowing—or type—of the promised land of heaven. How is it possible for us to enter that eternal promised land? The gates of heaven are open to us because Jesus did

pay a price. It cost him his life. Jesus paid the ultimate price—he suffered and died for each one of us personally. There is no greater price and no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends and that is what Jesus did for us.

How do we show him our gratitude? Do we offer him the best of ourselves? The most concrete act of thanksgiving is attending Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of obligation. Do we treat those days of acts of thanksgiving for the greatest gift we can ever receive? Or are we stingy in our gratitude by arriving late or leaving early or getting angry because Mass lasts one minute over an hour? What about our Friday penances? Every Friday of the year—unless it is a solemnity—is a day of penance. We are not required to give up meat outside of Lent, but we should make some type of sacrifice on Fridays. During Lent we give up meat. We give up meat to honor the sacrifice Jesus made by laying down his body and blood for us. Do our Friday sacrifices during and outside of Lent reflect our appreciation of Jesus' sacrifice?

Next time you are upset because Friday evening Confessions and Stations of the Cross interfere with your personal Friday night plans, think of Jesus on the Cross on Good Friday. It is easy to say that there were probably other things he'd like to have been doing on that day. Actually, that would be wrong. The Cross is exactly where he wanted to be because he knew it was the only way he could save us. He was there because he loved us but his love for us did not diminish his suffering one single bit; his love helped him endure the pain, it did not remove the pain.

We are at the very beginning of Lent. Right now is the time to examine our Lenten practices and how we continue those practices throughout the year. Take this very seriously. How are we saying "thank you" to Jesus?