

February 19, 2023

Because of the situation in which we find ourselves, with the possibility of little clergy presence in your midst for the Lenten season, I decided to use this, my last Sunday for a while, to walk with you into the blessed and holy season of Lent. This is a moment when the Church pauses to spend time in reflection, prayer and study; a time for members of the Body of Christ to recall the story of our Lord's passion in preparation for our celebrating the resurrection of God as he appeared among us in the person of the carpenter from Nazara, Jesus bar-Joseph.

Let me today just look briefly at something which we have already heard this morning: it came at the beginning of this service. In the name of Holy Mother Church, I said, "I invite you therefore, in the name of the Lord, to observe a holy Lent by self-examination, penitence, prayer, fasting and alms-giving and by reading and meditating on the Word of God..."

"Observe a holy Lent by self-examination": by this, I think we are all asked to wrestle with what we believe in. Most of us are cradle Christians, born and raised in the faith of the Church Universal. We may come from a variety of Christian denominations who have different ways of expressing the Faith, from the historic Creeds to the traditions of our human communities, but all Christians are asked to spend time in this season to ponder and answer the question which Jesus posed to Peter and to each of us. In the gospels, Jesus asks the disciples who people say he is and they offer a number of opinions, but the only one that matters is the Peter question, "But you, Peter (or Paul or Michael or Sharon or Fred or...or...or ...), who do YOU say I am? This is a time for each of us to see Christ with our eyes and hearts, not necessarily with those of an official declaration, but in response to the heartbeat of God pulsing within us. Allied with this is the question of what to do with this belief: we are impelled to wrestle with a secondary question, "What do I do after I say, 'I believe'?" A centering story for this difficult question might be the story of Maximilien Kolbe, a Polish monk who was arrested and sent to Auschwitz in 1941. His service and dedication to his fellow inmates, Jew and Gentile, male and female, young and old were treasured by all in the camp. When one of the prisoners managed to escape, the commandant called everyone together and ordered that ten people were to be executed in retaliation. He moved down the lines, tapping his intended victims with his swagger-stick. When the ten were set apart as the sacrificial lambs, one of them fell on his knees, begging for mercy. As the commandant laughingly thought about this, a single voice came from the gathered mass of people: "Commandant, let him go – take me instead". To the Nazi leader it mattered not who died ..just that ten did..and thus let the prisoner free as Brother Maximilien assumed his place and died in the starvation hut after many days of suffering. He wanted to make sure that his fellow victims knew that, in the midst of their pain and suffering and in their deaths, that Jesus was among them, sharing the darkness and inviting each of them into the Light. He felt compelled to do this not because he wanted to die, but because his sense of unity with Jesus and God invited him and he, of his own free will, accepted. This story allows us to wonder what it is that we would be willing to bet our lives on... This journey into understanding has as a roadmap or GPS the Jesus story as given to us in Mark, Matthew, Luke and John and in the writings of the early evangelists/preachers/teachers. So, Lent is an invitation for us to first of all find a Bible, blow the dust from its cover, open it and begin to read – I would suggest a way to enter this is to read the Gospel of Mark for two reasons: it is the shortest and the simplest of the four canonical gospels and was the first account written for the community which became known as the Church.

"Observe a holy Lent through penitence and prayer..." Penitence and prayer, prayer and penitence...Lent becomes for each us the opportunity to either rekindle or begin for the first time a

real relationship with God not through elaborate rites and rituals, as important as those are, but in simple conversation with the One who desperately wants to hold you, son or daughter, close to his heart and to syncopate his heartbeat with yours. That's all prayer is, really: intimate conversation with your Creator. For many, that might seem terrifying and impossible because of the image of God you carry in your life – the all – powerful, terrifying, remote deity sitting on a mountaintop who appears only when anger provokes him and, like the monster that lies under your bed, he rises in righteous anger to punish. As you read Mark, you will discover that this is not the God of Jesus – his God was a generous, loving Creator whose deepest wish is to live in intimate harmony with all his creation. Jesus tells a story in which the whole nature of God is shown in utter clarity and simplicity – it is the story of a father and his sons, one who stays and one who goes. After the younger son gets out of town and establishes his own life in the ginmills and gutters of the city, the father never quits on his boy – each day, he wanders down the path of the farm he has ceded to the son that stayed and leans against the fence which borders the road. Day after day, the old man stands, watches and waits for that speck of shadow, hoping it will be his child returning. And when that happens, the old man lifts the hem of his tunic, tucks in in his belt and tears off down the highway, calling his boy by name, yelling with joy and with such wild abandon grabbing his son in the bearhug or bearhugs and dances him home. All it took for that to happen was the young man saying three words: Dad, I'm sorry" - this act of penitence is all God wants of you ...

"Observe a holy Lent through fasting and almsgiving"... this is the part of Lent that most of us are probably most familiar with. We use Lent to hunker down against something which we know we probably shouldn't be doing anyway – smoking, drinking, gambling, overeating...you know! We swear off chocolate or sodas or alcohol or TV, knowing that at the end, we'll probably pick whatever the habit is up again but maybe, just maybe, this act of abstinence will take and will change our lives.. When I was a child, I remember giving up candy and taking whatever I would have spent on Milk Nut Loaf bars (my favourite chocolate treat) or Black Cherry ice cream (my fav) and take the coins to the cathedral here in Ottawa every Sunday when I would loudly dump the saved cash into this giant "piggybank" shaped like the cathedral, making sure there was always someone watching who would then report to either the Dean or __(gasp!) THE BISHOP ...what a good boy was !! Many of us still carry that idea with us and while there is nothing inherently wrong with giving something up, maybe, just maybe, what would be better would be to take something on – something of a serving nature in your family, your community, your church....just an idea! Your almsgiving would not necessarily be financial in nature but would be a sacrifice of time, energy, creativity, blood and sweat and tears to take the hand of someone who has been pushed down and raise them up so they might dance once again....

"Observe a holy Lent by reading and meditating on the Word of God"...I sorta covered that already but know that many of you might feel that you don't have the education, the training, the time or space to spend in a formal sort of way with reading either the Bible or some other material of a "religious" nature. Let me suggest that even fifteen or twenty minutes a day is sufficient, at least to start. Find, as Jesus described it, "a quiet and lonely place" where you can separate yourself from all the hubub and actions of life and simply retreat for a while, For me, I always prefer music as an accompaniment during this time, reading and reflecting with the beauty of human creativity pouring into my ears and through them into my heart. Some might choose not to read, but to walk or run; some might want to write or paint or sew or quilt as you meditate – the only activity I might suggest would not work might be playing a Fender Stratocaster electric slide blues guitar at full volume.... what matters is the dedicating of time away so you might enter your own sacred space where you will hear your heavenly Father speak to you. You might be surprised at how health-restoring this daily leaving is. It is also Biblical: Mark tells us that Jesus had a pattern of behaviour which he repeated all the time: Mark writes, "Long before dawn, Jesus left the house and went to a quiet and lonely place and there he prayed. Peter and the others found him and said, "Master, the people are looking for

you.” Jesus looked at his friends, nodded his head and said, “Let us go for that is why I have come.” This pattern of action, retreat, re-entry, action, retreat, re-entry remained with him until the end began in a place of retreat called Gethsemane. As Jesus needed and longed for his hidey-hole of peace and gentleness, so do we.

I realize that this was not a particularly theological reflection but I needed to remind myself why the Church has designated such a “down time” in its life to pause, pray and ponder. I will try as best I can to observe a holy Lent with my Bible on my Kobo, my music on my phone and the opportunity presented to me in Thailand to rise at dawn, find a quiet and lonely place with a view of sunrise over a beautiful beach with the sound of surf rising and spend time with the One who gives His all for me. May your Lenten time be a blessing and a beatitude to you and may you emerge in the light of Easter as a new person, a new community with renewed faith and hope. Amen