

First Sunday of Lent B - "Lord, Teach us your Paths; Show Sinners the Way."

February 18, 2024

Time flies. It seems we had just celebrated Christmas and Lent is here already. Lent touches something deep down in all our hearts, as it presents us with the challenge to reject sin and to be faithful to the God of love. The great themes of Lent are sin and salvation: the sin that wounds our hearts and our world, and the salvation that heals. But how can we allow these ideas, these truths, to inform our daily lives during the coming weeks? This Sunday's Responsorial Psalm (25: 4-5, 6-7, 8-9) gives us the answer: "Teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth...for you are the God of my salvation." the psalmist prays. Every sin is disobedience to God's will, a deviation from the path of wisdom, goodness, and everlasting life. Salvation consists in returning to that path; it consists in discovering and following, under the impulse of God's grace, God's will for our lives. Lent, then, is in the first place a time to reflect on how we have deviated from God's will. And then we need to confess these sins to God in the sacrament of penance, and experience the unconditional mercy of God's forgiveness. But turning away from the wrong path is only the first half of our Lenten journey. The second half is renewing our commitment to follow the right path from now on. We need the guidance that Christ gives us in prayer and through his Church's teachings. If we turn from the path of selfishness and ask God to lead us in the path of salvation, he surely will. And when he does, our lives will become fruitful oases of peace, wisdom, and courage in the desert of self-indulgence, violence, and relativism that our culture, in so many ways, has become. As we continue with this beautiful season of Lent, let us pray in our hearts: "Lord, teach us your paths; show sinners the way."

There are images from nature that dominate this First Sunday of Lent. In these images we find the key for living the next six weeks deeply and fruitfully, as God is hoping we will live them. The first image is that of the desert. After Jesus was baptized, but before he began his years of public ministry, the Spirit "drove Jesus out into the desert," (Mark 1:12-15) where he experienced temptation. Throughout the Bible, the desert is often referred to a place of testing, where we experience our weakness and dependence on God. The desert is a place where our illusions of self-sufficiency and comfort fade away. When we are in the desert, either literally or figuratively, we quickly realize that we need God. It is the place of suffering and hardship that sin has led us to. Both original sin and also our own personal sins have interfered with God's plan for our lives and for our world; they have put us in need of salvation. As we journey into the wilderness of our innermost self, we discover we stand before God in all sincerity and truth. This helps to see ourselves as we really are, we become more aware of our own faults and the need to change becomes painfully obvious. The second image in this Sunday's Readings is the flood, the abundance of water that cleansed the world of sin at the time of Noah (Genesis 9:8-15). That ancient flood of water foreshadowed Christian baptism, the flood of grace that purifies our souls from sin, bringing new spiritual life into the desert of our sin-damaged hearts. We need daily prayer to help us as it is the vital life-line in our friendship with God. It will strengthen our faith and trust in God and bring us closer to him. Lent is the time of awareness of sin and salvation: our sins, and Christ's loving sacrifice that leads to salvation. These are the most fundamental aspects of our Catholic faith, and these are the themes that should fill our hearts and minds throughout the season of Lent. Lent is a time for soul searching as we are challenged to measure up to the call of God in various aspects of life. The challenge of saying 'No' to self and 'Yes' to God is what constitutes the struggle.

It's good for us to be reminded of these simple, beautiful, basic truths. I recently read an article about a little boy who wanted to buy a pet dog. He went to the pet shop, saw five puppies for sale, and wanted to buy one. The man replied, "Some are fifty dollars, some are more." The little boy had only \$1.47. The man said, "I'm sorry, but you'll just have to save your money and come back again." Just then, the man's wife brought out another puppy from the back of the store. It was a smaller dog with a crippled leg, and limped badly when it tried to walk. They explained that this one had been born without a hip socket and would always be lame. "I wish I had the money to buy that one!" exclaimed the little boy with excitement. "It's not for sale," said the man, "but I'll gladly give him to you for free." But the little boy refused, saying: "No, sir. That little dog is worth just as much as the others. I'll give you \$1.47 now, and fifty cents a month until I have paid in full." Confused, the man asked, "Why do you want a dog that will never run and play like the other puppies?" The boy reached down, rolled up his pant to reveal a badly twisted, crippled left leg, supported by a metal brace and said, "Mister, I don't run and play too well myself. I think this little puppy will need someone like me who understands." That's the Catholic faith in a nutshell: Jesus becomes just like us, paid the full price of our sins, and offers us salvation, just because he loves us.

The crucifix is a summary of this story of sin and salvation. Christ's wounds are vivid images of sin, of what sin does to ourselves, the world, and our relationship with God. But they are also vivid images of the intensity of his love for us: he suffered freely and willingly, to pay the price for our sins and give us hope for salvation. One of the most fascinating stories of sin and salvation happened during the Second World War. Mgr O'Flaherty's duel with the Gestapo leader Kappler in Rome is legendary. The charismatic priest was running an escape operation for Allied servicemen and Jewish civilians from the confines of his Vatican office while Kappler's job was to find and kill them. After Nazi was defeated, Kappler was sentenced to life imprisonment with no parole for his role in the massacre of hundreds of Jews and was told he would never be freed. He invited Mgr O'Flaherty to visit him and, within days, the priest arrived to meet and talk with his former foe. He visited regularly and eventually, Kappler was converted and baptized.

Besides the desert and the flood, there is another third image from nature in this Sunday's Readings: the rainbow (Genesis 9:8-15). Noah probably didn't know the scientific explanation behind rainbows, but he did understand their spiritual meaning. All of creation has a physical nature that science explores and explains. But creation also has a spiritual meaning - it is a gift from our God, a gift full of messages, lessons, and inspiration. Science can explain the prismatic refraction of light in a rainbow, but it cannot explain the thrill of wonder that fills our hearts when we behold that same rainbow. A rainbow appears when sunlight and storm clouds come together. And God chose this as a symbol of his covenant, of his promise that salvation would conquer sin. Jesus, as this Sunday's Second Reading reminds us so beautifully, has suffered, died, risen from the dead, and ascended into heaven, conquering sin and evil once and for all. During Lent, let's pay more attention than usual to the crucifix, maybe by wearing a crucifix pendant on the necklace, or using an image of the crucifix as a screen saver. The crucifix is our rainbow. For, while we suffer in the storms of hardship and sin that make our lives and world so painful and difficult, we still continue to follow Christ, because the light of his love shines brightly even in the midst of the storm. Today we have the privilege to renew our hope once again through the Mass and Holy Communion, to be freshly inspired by a glimpse of our rainbow. When we see a rainbow in the

sky, the first thing we do is tell those around us, so they will see it too. This Lent, let's do the same with the rainbow that shines in our Christian hearts. Let this Lent be a call for a change in behaviour, to stay away from sinning and grow in the love of God. Let this Lent be a season of grace to be taken seriously to make it a purifying experience of vital spiritual worth.