

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 8 Year C 2022 (Quinquagesima)

This week we commence the holy season of Lent. Over the next few days, churches all around the world will undergo a transformation of sorts, as the church calendar moves from the season after Epiphany to the season of Lent. Our shouts of “Alleluia!” will give way to Lent’s more solemn cry, “Lord have mercy.” Next Sunday you will find most of the images in the church veiled. Many churches - ours included - will retire many of the decorative accretions in the church in favor of simpler and more restrained fittings and fixtures. Now, the restrained atmosphere the church seeks to evoke through all this is not simply window dressing. We don’t do all this to simply ‘mark a change of season’. It’s not like changing your wardrobe for the cooler autumn weather. No. These physical changes to our *environment* are meant to reflect what is going on in us *internally*. And this right and proper. What is going on inside for us internally *should* have an outward expression. That is the faith of the church catholic. Ours is a holistic church, an incarnational church. The externals *do* matter. Which is *not* to say they are the only thing that matters or the most important thing that matters. They aren’t. But they *do* matter. And to say they don’t is simply to make us gnostic dualists, which orthodox Christianity most certainly isn’t. We do not assert the spiritual over the material. We seek an integrated faith where the external and internal, the spiritual and the physical, are properly ordered, and allowed to take their place.

The gospel placed before us today (somewhat coincidentally), creates a helpful bridge between these Sundays after epiphany and the penitential season before us. It highlights how Our Lord proposes a high level of authenticity for those who seek to follow him. The few verses from Luke’s gospel from his so-called ‘Sermon on the Plain’ continue what we’ve been hearing for a few weeks now, of the practical consequences of faith in Jesus. Faith in Jesus is not simply a matter of the heart. Not simply a case of spiritual and internal conversion, much less a case of good intentions. Faith, even while it certainly *does* seek to shape and convert the heart and mind, must also find practical, concrete expression. In other words, Christian faith must be *an integrated faith*. It is not just a matter of the mind or the heart or the spirit. It is also a matter of lived consequence, a faith that is experienced. A faith which can be seen. In the same way, it cannot just be about the externals, about activism, or about experience. Because these cannot be sustained with any amount of authenticity if they do not emerge from interior conversion.

Now, there are few instances in the gospels where our Lord is shown to have lost his temper, of him getting angry. But one of the 'triggers' (we might say in modern psychobabble) was hypocrisy: of saying one thing and doing another, of presenting a certain face but another reality hidden behind it. A lack of integration, a lack of authenticity. It is to this that the gospel today speaks directly, and the lessons are timeless. That we cannot pretend to be something we're not. To do so can have devastating consequences. Presenting yourself as clear sighted and able to lead when in fact you can't see a thing will have everyone end up in the ditch! That we ought not presume to correct the faults of others without first recognizing one's own. And the principle of integration and authenticity is clearly expressed in Our Lord's summary at the end of the gospel portion today: *For a man's words flow from what is in his heart.* The kind of fruit that is born on a tree reinforces this idea. Because the fruit we see and enjoy, which provides food and sustenance (in other words, *the externals*) come from what is *hidden and unseen*. What occurs in the mysterious process under the earth, through the roots and branches is what determines the quality (or lack thereof) of the fruit.

We know that few things do more damage to the witness of the gospel than believers and churches who say one thing and do another. There are no shortage of examples where this has been, and is, the case. I do not need to give examples here. You know them well enough. But they just go to show the difficulty of living that life of authenticity and integrity envisaged by the gospel. And it surely provides the lesson (which we constantly need reminding of) that to live the life of the gospel, we cannot rely on our own strength. The *aligning* of our inner life and our external life, our experiential life and our internal life, the body and the spirit, comes only through the power and grace of God.

Maybe the truest and most helpful test of this in Christian life is our observance of Lent. What provides us with the surest and most reliable framework *to progress* on this front is precisely what Mother Church calls this 'Season of Grace' now upon us. Lent is the solemn and annual call to help us look at this question of integrity and wholeness and implore God's help to do so. Lent is *not* the grim, pessimistic, dismal season that it is often imagined to be. It is essentially a means to help us prepare for the joy, wonder and mystery of Easter. But it is an invitation to be taken seriously precisely because of the wonder and mystery of Easter!

To live Easter life, to live resurrection life, means looking at and addressing those things within us which Our Lord directs us to in the gospel today, things which are not in alignment, which keep us in darkness. It's why in the wisdom of the church Lent isn't just about an internal spiritual servicing. It's not just about getting 'my personal relationship with God' a bit better. The fathers of the church are quite clear on this. If what is going on inside is not matched by what is happening outside, then something is amiss. If we are simply pursuing an internal, spiritual path without it having concrete consequences on the way we live, we are actually furthering the problem!

That is why along with prayer, almsgiving – practical, sacrificial giving - is part of the Lenten equation, and fasting as well. It is when these three are *held together*, as part of a whole and rich Lenten observance, that we begin to reverse a dangerous and ultimately heretical position. Lent lived well can remedy that disastrous practice of categorizing our life into discrete but ultimately unrelated parts. Lent is an opportunity for honesty, and for what needs healing within us. But the fruits of the season of grace will remain unripened, or in fact rot on the tree, if the outer and inner, the public and private, the physical and the spiritual, are not held together.

In my sermon last week - commenting on the gospel portion immediately prior to what we hear today - I noted that the ethical sayings of our Lord are certainly important. They *are* an attractive feature of our Lord's ministry. They have provided a standard of behavior which has revolutionized the world and how human beings interact with each other. But they only make sense in reference to faith in God. The ethical life which allows for justice, mercy, forgiveness, generosity only emerges from belief in the truth of divine law. Most critically, however, living a moral life – an ethical life - according to Christ's own words, we can in fact *reveal something of the truth of God* himself. And the same is going on in what is placed before us today. And by the same measure, our observance of Lent. Lent is not just to make us better people. Lent has the potential to reveal something about the truth of God himself. When we talk about a life of integrity, a life where the inner and outer parts of our lives are in harmony, where there isn't a separation between our public and private lives, where love of God is matched by our love of neighbour, something the mystery and truth of God is revealed. *Hear O Israel, The Lord our God, the Lord is One.* Unity and harmony, the life of integrity and authenticity, can reveal the very Oneness of God. They reflect our destiny to live for eternity in perfect union with the One true God. Amen.