

## Sermon Ordinary Sunday 6/Quinquagesima Year B 2024

As has been mentioned more than once in this place now, Lent commences this week. I imagine that over the decades the importance of this holy season has been hammered also more than once from this pulpit. But one of things that we might miss, or forget, or ignore is how the traditional disciplines of Lent – prayer, fasting, and almsgiving – apply to all of us. The Lenten disciplines aren't just for 'other' type of Christians. Or Christians from other denominations. Or enthusiastic Christians! *All* faithful Christians should *embrace* this season as a gift and to take it seriously. Oftentimes we give up on the disciplines of Lent simply because we find that it is actually hard to break our habits. It is difficult to replace a vice with a virtue. Or even just indifference with something positive. It is tricky to give up one thing so to implement something new into our crowded (and to be frank) often routine lives. It is easier to fall back into old patterns of behaviour than to put something else – even something positive and life giving - in its place.

But this is the great lesson of Lent: that we are slaves to so much of what is base and unhelpful. We think we are so terribly in control of our lives. We like to think we are not slaves to our passions. We like to think we are more than just our habits and instincts. We like to imagine that our spiritual lives are as good as they can be, that we are as generous as we can be, and that we are not subject to every pang of hunger.

We can easily give up on the disciplines of Lent (or not bother about them at all) because in our cultural context we are almost totally geared to things always being easy. But I'll let you into a little secret... No one is going to die of hunger here if they skip snack foods, fast goods, meat, sweets or alcohol for forty days. No one is going to miss out on any important bit of news if you go without watching the evening news and read a spiritual book instead. No one here is going to be sleep-deprived by going to bed and getting up a little earlier so to attend an early morning mass. No one's life here is going to be so impacted if they forego their weekly coffee down the street with friends and instead put aside the money they save for some charitable cause.

In the scheme of things, these are *small* sacrifices. These are small inconveniences. Yet even these small things we don't bother with. I'll let you into another little secret... If your stomach growls and you feel the pangs of hunger, or you become grumpy and short-tempered because you've skipped a meal, good. Because it can remind you of all those things you fill your life with which are not Christ. If you feel craving headaches because you have given up your morning coffee, good. Because it can remind you of all those things which you are dependent upon which are not Christ.

If friends at dinner give you a stage look because you passed over the offer of a glass of wine, good. Because it can remind you of all those times when you have *not stood up* for Christ in public. If you feel a gnawing emptiness and fidgety because you have given up Facebook or Instagram or just mindless scrolling on your smartphone, good! Because it can remind you of all those things we fill our days with so to *avoid* Christ. If you find you have to go without some item for a few weeks (and it is just a few weeks) because you have resolved to give a little more generously either to the church or to a charitable cause, good. Because this can remind you of how much we actually *hold back* from giving ourselves over totally to Christ.

All this to say, the small inconveniences, the minor discomforts, the little pains and embarrassments, the little sufferings we endure through Lent are for a good. So geared are we to comfort and ease, that it is almost a revolutionary statement to propose that our sufferings might be for a good! And that good is that these sufferings, these small self-denials, *unite us more closely to Christ*. Now, if you think your relationship with Christ is 100% and as good as it gets, then don't bother Lent! But if you think there is room for improvement, then it most certainly is! As has been said before, the disciplines of Lent are not ends in themselves. The disciplines we seek to adopt and sustain through Lent *direct us to Christ*. They are certainly not about a spiritualised weight loss program. They are not about exerting self-control or self-mastery. We adopt some small sacrifice to point us to the one, perfect, eternal sacrifice of Christ himself.

On this Sunday before Lent, the gospel reading placed before us anticipates many of these important ideas. Now, we often approach this story as an example of Our Lord's compassion. And it surely is. A man in profound need, in this case a leper, approaches Jesus, pleading to be healed. And Jesus hears him and heals him. Now some translations of this story will read that Jesus felt 'sorry' for the leper. Or that he was 'moved with pity', or 'overcome with compassion'. Other ancient authorities, however, render the Greek word here as 'anger.' A curious reaction to be sure. This reading, then, says, '*becoming angry he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said, 'I do so will: be made clean.'*' Because reference to Jesus' anger is, we might say, the 'harder' reading, it has the better chance of being the more accurate.

But it begs the question, of course, why and with whom is Jesus angry? At the man who has dared to approach him against the requirements of the law? At the question of his willingness to exercise his divine power: *if you want...?* And in light of passages from the last couple of weeks from this Gospel, at the manifestation of the demonic hold on

humanity displayed in the man's ravaged physical condition? All these explanations are possible. But the anger could also be connected with a tension that runs through the whole story. Jesus has the power *and* the willingness to make the man clean. But as the conclusion of the story shows, he will not do so *without cost to himself*. The great act of divine power will only attract a greater degree of public enthusiasm that in fact threatens the true direction of his mission. A threat he had already attempted to escape from by withdrawing to the deserted place after his healing work in Capernaum.

To avoid a repeat of this situation, Jesus directed the healed man to show himself to the priest but to tell no one, to no avail. The man spreads the news everywhere and crowds come in from all sides, and Jesus is back in the situation he was seeking to avoid. In a striking note irony, (and perhaps the key to this entire story) Jesus now ends up unable to enter the towns and cities. Jesus is now compelled to live the kind of 'wilderness' existence from which the leper had been set free. In other words, in healing the man, Jesus becomes the 'leper'. *This* is the cost he bears. Jesus becomes the outcast. This story, then, is much more than one account among many highlighting the compassion of Jesus. It shows the whole costly entrance of the Son of God into the uncleanness and alienation of humanity, an entrance that will culminate as he dies on the cross, hanging between two bandits with a cry of abandonment on his lips. This very climax we will hear recounted in a few weeks' time on Palm Sunday.

In the gospel today Jesus reaches out and touches the leper in all his dehumanizing disfigurement. But this simply points us to his Passion in which Jesus 'touches' the whole human condition. Contrary to conventional expectations, Jesus does not 'catch' uncleanness from this contact. On the contrary. All who approach him in faith will 'catch' healing and wholeness from him. The cost to Jesus is not uncleanness. The cost to Jesus comes in the hostility his healings provoke. Yes, they lead to enthusiasm (and exclusion) but also jealousy by those in power (as revealed in the story of Jesus' Passion). Yet, *despite the cost*, Jesus' will and determination to reach out and touch us in our uncleanness is clear: *I do so will*, he exclaims, *be made clean*. The cost Jesus will bear in his willingness to reach out, to touch, and to heal is perfectly shown in Gethsemane and on the Cross.

My brothers and sisters, progress in the spiritual life doesn't just happen. Coming closer to Christ doesn't occur by accident. There is a cost. Yes, the price has been paid in full by Christ. But as his disciples, we are called to pattern our lives after him. This Lent, let us welcome the costliness of being a follower of Jesus. This Lent, let the life and healing we enjoy reflect something of the price at which it was won. Amen.