



Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time February 14, 2010 C

LUKE'S SERMON ON THE PLAIN LENT: A SPIRITUAL SPRINGTIME

I thank all of you who participated in our Catholic Appeal this weekend. As I said in church, our challenge this year is especially tough because our assessment is up by almost \$30,000 from last year. But in a big parish like ours, if all of us in a position to participate choose to do so, I truly believe we can climb that mountain and reach our goal.

We are all familiar with Matthew's *Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes* (Matt 5:1-12), but perhaps less familiar with Luke's *Sermon on the Plain*. The following commentary on Luke's sermon may help you to understand what Jesus is saying in these verses.

Jesus takes the accepted beliefs of his day and stands them on the people's heads. He identifies four groups of people who would have been regarded as very blest but declares them anything but blest. And he takes another four groups who would have been regarded as cursed but pronounces them blest. Jesus is speaking to a situation in which the economically poor were reduced to begging. They were marginalized. The rich and better off members of the community failed in their covenant with God by not coming to the rescue of the poor. When this happened, God sided with the poor and spoke on their behalf. Let's now look briefly at each of the four sets of blessings and woes.

Blessed are the poor . . . woe to the rich.

The poor are not blest because they are materially destitute. Rather, they are blest because they are able to place their trust in God in the midst of poverty. They are blest because God is on their side. The rich are not cursed simply because they are materially well off. Rather, they are cursed because of their failure to come to the rescue of the poor by generously sharing their blessings with them. They may be having their reward *now*, but they will lose out big time in the reign of God.

Blessed are the hungry . . . woe to the full.

Jesus is not saying it's a blessing to be starving and a curse to have a good meal. He is telling us that we are blest if we can keep trusting in God in empty/hungry times. Also, it is a blessing if we are hungry for God. It

is a curse if our "plenty times" lead us to ignore God. It is a curse to be spiritually self-satisfied. It is a curse to misuse food and waste it.

Blessed are you if weeping . . . woe if laughing.

It is a blessing if we mourn for our sins, for the injustices in our world, and for the losses we experience in life. It is not a curse to be happy. But it is a curse if our laughter is a cover-up for our sadness and if it is at the expense of others. Indeed, some become rich at the expense of others.

Blessed are you if people hate you woe if people speak well of you.

We are blest if people reject us because of our love for Jesus. On the other hand, it is a curse to be well spoken of in a world that rejects Jesus.

Poverty, hunger, tears and rejection are *not* to be sought after. But if they come to us as a result of our following Jesus, then they are blessings. God can turn poverty, hunger, tears and rejection into blessings. We see this when people turn to God in bad times and convert to his ways. On the other hand, a good financial portfolio could lead to our spiritual demise. Finally, the beatitudes only make sense to those who have fully embraced the ways of Jesus. To the rest, they are nonsense.

Lent: A Spiritual Springtime (Begins this Wednesday)

This Wednesday begins the holy season of Lent. The word "Lent" comes from the Anglo-Saxon word for springtime.

In the early Church, Lent was, for the unbaptized, a period of final preparation for baptism or initiation into the Christian community. For the already baptized, Lent was an opportunity to deepen their baptismal commitment to Christ. Today, for both the baptized and the unbaptized, Lent is intended to be a *spiritual springtime*—a time to focus more fully on our relationship with Christ. On Ash Wednesday, the prophet Joel says to us:

*"Rend your hearts,
not your garments."*

Commenting on that verse from Joel, Thomas Merton writes: “Rendering only your garments lets in nothing but air, rendering our hearts lets out sin and lets in God’s grace.”

The following reflection on Lent was written by the late Joseph Cassidy, a bishop in the west of Ireland.

“If Lent is to mean anything in our lives, it has to be a season of renewal. The work itself means ‘springtime’. So above everything else, it’s a time for new life, for fresh beginnings and growth. The idea is that we die with Christ, like the seed in the ground, and rise with him to more abundant life! We died to sin and rise to integrity. We die to selfishness and rise to generosity—especially towards the poor. We prune ourselves through penance, growing thereby into stronger, more healthy Christians. ‘If anyone will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me’ (Mt 16:24). And we put ashes on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday as a sign of that death to the selfish self that we are prepared to undergo!

So Lent is a stretching time, a challenging time, a seasonal reminder of the intrinsically challenging nature of the Christian life. As an exercise in penance—out of a desire to grow in self-control perhaps—people give up things during Lent like candy, desserts, cigarettes or drink. I wouldn’t quarrel with that at all. All that is part of the Lenten spirit. The one point that I would emphasize, however, and that I’d like you to remember, is that Lent is not primarily about the extraordinary. It’s about the ordinary. It’s not primarily about extra things, like sweets or cigarettes, it’s about those things that are part of our everyday lives. ***Lent is a time when we make a fresh start, when we try again, a little bit more earnestly, with sincerity and honesty, to live up to the responsibilities and challenges of our Christian lives.***

And what does all that involve? What are these challenges and responsibilities? Easy to touch on, too substantive to develop. Things like conscientiousness in our work, honesty in our dealings, dependability in our assurances, truthfulness in our assertions, humility in our judgments, purity in our lifestyle, generosity in our giving! Lent is blowing hard on dead embers. Lent is shaking awake sleepy hypocrisies! ***Lent is taking on again, with commitment and vigor, the imitation of Christ. Lent is Christ made real.***

Lent is even more than that—and I’ll finish on this one! Sometimes, in my experience, a distance can develop between yourself and somebody else. The somebody else can be a friend or a relative. The distance has its origin in lack of contact. Because I’m otherwise busy or burdened or preoccupied, I don’t make the extra effort needed to keep in touch. Time passes, apartness

becomes a pattern. I know I should be seeing the person; I sense his or her disappointment, even resentment, and experience my own guilt. The longer it goes on, the more difficult it is to close the gap, to make the contact. Distance in itself becomes an obstacle! But when contact is eventually made, when communication is restored, there’s regret that it didn’t happen sooner. There’s the experience of renewal, of life shared, of a relationship worth sustaining from now on.

The distance that develops between ourselves and somebody else can so easily happen with Our Lord. He’s there in our lives already but too much in the background, like a statue in the gallery of a Church. It’s a distance he feels and that he wants us to close: ‘Come to me, all you who labor and are overburdened’ (Mt 11:28). Because he hates the distance between us and because he is Our Lord, it is imperative that we be close to him. He craves our love, needs our commitment, works through us in his mission. It is imperative that we be close to him because we need his love, his truth, his guidance, his salvation, his meaning!

Somebody said that Christianity is not so much a religion as a relationship. The relationship has to be there. In his book *The Eternal Year*, Karl Rahner, S.J., says that, for modern people, Lent begins long before Ash Wednesday and goes on long after Easter Sunday. Lent is not so much a season as a condition. A condition in which modern people suffer—because God seems far away. Distance again. So let’s try during this Lenten season to narrow the distance if only a little—to inch closer to Christ in our thought, our prayer and our love. I said to you a moment ago that Lent is Christ made real. I say to you now with even greater emphasis that Lent is Christ made near! Think about it! If each of us can draw closer to him during the coming weeks, then this little reflection will have been well worthwhile. Lent will have been a real springtime in our lives.

Have a blessed week,

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