



## Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time March 2, 2014 A

### What spoke to you in this Sunday's readings? Preparing for Lent

When small groups gather together to share on the Sunday readings, the first faith-sharing question is: *What verse in the readings spoke to you most and why?* The following are some verses in this Sunday's readings that spoke to me.

***"Can a mother forget her infant, be without the tenderness for the child in her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you."***

This verse from the first reading, addressed to us by God through the prophet Isaiah, speaks to me because it imparts the tender image of God. Nothing is more tender than a mother caring for the child in her womb or a mother cuddling her newborn baby. This Sunday, God's word is telling us that such tenderness is a visible image of the love that our God has for us. The challenge for us is to believe this Good News—not only in our heads but, more importantly, in our hearts.

The verse reassures us that even if a mother forgets or abandons her child, God will never forget or abandon us. Sadly, many people suffer abandonment in the journey of life. There are mothers (and more so, fathers) who abandon their children. Husbands and wives abandon their marriage. Loyalty in the work situation has become a thing of the past. We may even feel abandoned by God. During such times of spiritual darkness, we must hang tough and not allow Satan to discourage us. We must *always remember* that He who allowed his Son to suffer greatly for us *is* with us in our suffering and pain.

The verse presents one of the very few feminine images of God in the Bible. God is portrayed as a caring mother. God is both father *and* mother to us, but in truth, his divine love is way beyond fatherly or motherly love.

### ***"Servants of Christ" and "stewards of the mysteries of God"***

In our second reading, Paul reminds us that as Disciples of Christ, we are called to be *servants of Christ* and *stewards of the mysteries of God*. "*Servants of Christ*" are those who proclaim the Good News of

Christ. "*Stewards of God's mysteries*" are those who distribute God's blessings, both spiritual and material, which they receive from God. Hopefully, at the end of our lives here on earth, God will say to us: "Well done, good and faithful servant, for you generously shared (and did not hoard) the blessings I gave you."

***"I am not conscious of anything against me, I do not hereby stand acquitted; the one who judges me is the Lord."***

This verse, also from today's second reading, is an important one to be mindful of when we go to confession. It is the verse that moves me to say: "I am sorry for all my sins—the ones I am aware of and those I am unaware of." We should not be surprised that our biggest sins might be those we are *unaware* of, that cause us to be spiritually blind. For example, some people may never feel a need to confess the nasty things they say about our President or some other politician whom they dislike or even despise. Some people may never feel a need to confess their unwillingness to share their faith when the opportunity arises. They might say that they are uncomfortable doing that. Actually, it does not matter how we feel. What matters is we speak up and do the right thing, whether or not it is comfortable for us. Some of us who are materially blessed may think that we are quite generous but when we do the arithmetic, we may face the inconvenient truth that we are selfish with our financial resources yet we never feel the need to confess our sin of greed. You can see why this particular verse from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians is very important for us to keep in mind.

### ***Do we really have to hate money in order to love God?***

In today's Gospel, Jesus says: "*No one can serve two masters. He will either hate one or love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon.*" What is Jesus saying to us here?

We can be sure Jesus does not mean that we should have no regard for the money that pays for our food and shelter and other necessities of life. What he *is* saying is that our preoccupation with money and things should never be allowed to become more important than our love for God. Because of the numerous times that Jesus speaks about money and material possessions, we can

be sure that he is very aware of the danger that love of money can do to our spiritual welfare.

Some people have a gift for making money, others have a gift for making *loads* of money. Such gift is something to be celebrated. But in God's eyes, such people should also be exceptionally generous. Yet some of the wealthiest people today may be totally blind to their responsibility to be good and generous stewards of God's blessings. Jesus says: "*To those whom much has been given, much will be expected.*" He does not bless us in order to be greedy but so that we can help the needy and our church family.

**Worry.** A big chunk of today's Gospel is about worry. Jesus asks: "*Can any of you by your worrying add a single moment to your life?*" The answer, of course, is no. The opposite, in fact, is true. Worrying may shorten our lives. We can be certain that if we are 'worry warts,' we are not enjoying our lives. Many people worry about past sins, faults and bad decisions, while others worry too much about the future. Satan uses worry to steal our joy and peace. Be that as it may, it is only natural for us to be anxious about a medical test or losing our job when the company is laying people off. But we must do everything possible to avoid becoming worry warts. How do we do this? By *daily* combating our worry tendencies with acts of trust in God. When we catch ourselves in worry mode, we will do well to say, "I renounce worry. Jesus, I place my trust in you."

### **Lent begins this Wednesday**

This Wednesday, millions of Catholics across our nation will go to their local churches to receive ashes on their forehead. Why ashes? In the religious realm, ashes have a two-fold meaning:

- They are a stark reminder of our mortality; hence, the words: "Remember that you are but dust and unto dust you shall return."
- They are also a sign of repentance. In ancient Israel when people felt convicted of sin and were moved to repentance, they put on 'sackcloth and ashes.' On Ash Wednesday, as the minister places the ashes on our forehead, he/she will say to us: ***Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.***

In next Wednesday's first reading, the prophet Joel exhorts us to: "*Rend your hearts and not your garments.*" Commenting on this verse, Thomas Merton said: "*Rending only our garments lets in nothing but the cold air, but rending our hearts lets out sin and lets in the clean air of God's spring.*"

The word "Lent" means "spring." Lent is intended to be a new spring in our lives, a time when we invigorate our faith. Lent calls us to a change of heart, attitude and behavior. If we go through all the rituals, prayers and Masses of Lent but nothing is changing in our attitude and behavior, Jesus may say to us what he said to the Pharisees: "*This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me.*"

The late Fr. Henri Nouwen said: "*Jesus does not speak of a change of activities.... Or even a change of pace. He speaks of a change of heart. This makes everything different, even while everything appears to be the same.*"

So, ideally, when we come to church next Wednesday for ashes, we should entreat the Lord: "I want, with the help of your grace, to change my heart where change is needed."

The question is what needs changing? Each of us should ask the Holy Spirit to help us to *see* what behavior or attitude needs changing.

### **Prayer, fasting and almsgiving are three very good Lenten spiritual exercises**

In the Gospel on Ash Wednesday, Jesus speaks about prayer, fasting and almsgiving. When carried out with sincerity of heart, these three spiritual exercises can bring spiritual transformation to our lives.

**Prayer.** In and through prayer, we make room for God in our lives. Giving God some of our time is, among other things, an act of generosity. We *always* have time or *make* time for what is important to us. If we *say* that our relationship with God is important, then we will *make* time for prayer. For starters, we will give God our *total* attention for one of the 96 fifteen-minute periods in every day. How can we *say* God is important yet fail miserably in giving God a mere 15 minutes of our time each day. For retired people, it should be easy enough to give God more time.

How should we spend quiet time with our God? As the Spirit leads us. We could read and meditate on the Lenten devotional by Bishop Morneau. We could pray a decade or two of the Rosary for specific intentions, personal and global. We could speak to God from our hearts and perhaps, most importantly, we could spend some time quietly sitting in the presence of God.

**Fasting.** If Jesus fasted, we should also fast (unless our doctor prescribes otherwise). Fasting can take many forms, e.g., less TV, alcohol, internet, shopping,

negative talk. But we should all consider some form of fasting from food. Food is what Jesus fasted from. We need to experience hunger in the belly to identify even just a little bit with starving people and to get in touch with the hungers of the soul. Ideally, our fasting is a means to an end. We fast from some shopping so that we may give to the poor. We fast from a half hour of TV to make space for prayer. On the issue of fasting, Early Church Father St. John Chrysostom said: *“Let the hands fast, remaining clean from stealing and greed. Let the legs fast, avoiding streets that lead to sinful sights. Let the ear fast, refusing to listen to evil talk against others and sly defamations. Let the mouth fast from disgraceful and abusive words. What gain is there when we avoid eating chicken, but chew up and consume our brothers and sisters?”*

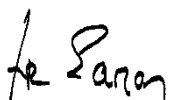
As we can see, there are many forms of fasting. The question is what *form of fasting will this* Lent make us a little more like Jesus.

**Almsgiving.** Almsgiving is our way to reach out to the poor by sharing our money, clothing and food. You can give gifts of food, money and clothing to our *Thrift Store* and *Social Concerns*. Both are located on Aurora Road, half a mile west of US 1. (On Ash Wednesday, we will have an *Almsgiving* collection for Social Concerns.)

Another form of almsgiving that we might consider for Lent is forgiveness. Of this important kind of almsgiving, St. Augustine said: *“There are many kinds of alms, the giving of which helps us to obtain pardon for our sins; but none is greater than that by which we forgive from our heart a sin that someone has committed against us.”* .

**Prayer, fasting and almsgiving,** like three legs of a tripod, make up the traditional practices of Lent. Prayer nourishes our spirits. Fasting disciplines our bodies, helps us to seek the Lord with greater intensity, and puts us in solidarity with those who suffer. Works of charity open our hearts as we commit ourselves to the good of others. Properly carried out, fasting, prayer and almsgiving will bring about a change of heart. They are not the point of Lent but rather the spiritual aids that will help us ‘put on Christ’ a little more.

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Le Parron". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.