

## 1st Sunday of Lent, Year A

Last Wednesday, with the ceremony of the ashes, the Church began the season of Lent - a forty day period in which we take stock of our lives in order to prepare ourselves for the high point of the liturgical year – the celebrations of Holy Week and Easter.

Without maintenance a car would soon become undrivable and a home would fall down around our ears. Without the kind of loving maintenance that you Mums and Dads and your children contribute, a family, too, would stop functioning well. If we do not tend a garden, flowers die and weeds take over. So it is with our lives. We may be flying along with the wind in our sails, or we may be just drifting along going nowhere in particular. Either way, it is important that we learn to head in a direction that is life-giving. The aim of Lent is to open our minds and hearts to God's Spirit who will show us Jesus and also show us the sin in our lives which is stopping our movement towards him, and causing us to be stuck in the spiritual doldrums or, worse still, is driving us onto a reef where we are breaking up.

As Catholics we are bound by a serious obligation to go to communion at least once a year, sometime during the Lent-Easter Season. This is because, if we never come to communion, we cannot maintain our life of union with Jesus. Jesus himself said: 'Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you cannot have life in you'(John 6:53). Therefore, if we are in a state of serious sin that prevents us coming to communion, there is a consequent obligation to come to the Sacrament of Reconciliation sometime before Easter.

It seems appropriate, on this First Sunday of Lent, to focus our reflections on sin. To do this let us begin by examining Psalm 51, which has been chosen as the Responsorial Psalm for Ash Wednesday and again for today. 'Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness. In your compassion, blot out my offence. O wash me more and more from my guilt, and cleanse me from my sin'.

Notice that the focus of the psalmist's attention is not on himself or his sin. He is looking to God. It is only in the light of God's forgiving love that he has the courage to admit his sin. This provides a good example for us. If we look at our own sin in all its starkness and take our eyes off God, we can experience only embarrassment, guilt and shame that we have acted so badly. Or we experience disappointment, or perhaps depression, when we think of how sin has got us into the mess we are in. In a state of sin, we are like a diseased plant, deprived of sun and water. However we appear on the outside, inside, our soul is not alive. There is a place for shame, guilt and regret, but the proper way to look at sin is to see it as God sees it. God, like the father of the prodigal son, is longing for us to return to his embrace. He wants us to come home to him and to the community, and to communion with his Son. When we sin in a serious way we refuse this invitation. There is a special grace in Lent for us to change, to repent, to open our hearts and our lives to say Yes to God's loving invitation.

So the first step is to fix our gaze on God who is love – and there is no better way to do this than to look upon Jesus on the cross. The second step is to be honest in admitting our sin. Not necessarily the sin others are accusing us of. They have their own agenda and their judgment of us can often be distorted. Our need is to admit our sin in so far as we honestly see it. This is what the psalmist does: 'My offences truly I know them. My sin is always before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned; what is evil in your sight I have done'. When he says that he has sinned

against God alone, he does not intend to deny the hurt that sin causes others. It is just that his heart is so caught up with God's forgiving love that he can focus on nothing else.

So, the first thing is to keep our eyes fixed on God's love, especially as shown us in the Heart of Jesus. He invites us to come to him and he promises us forgiveness. The second thing is to admit and name our sin as simply and honestly as we can. The third is to recognise that left to ourselves we cannot really change. We have tried but we fail. We cannot seem to do without expressions of love that we know are inappropriate. We know that it is wrong, but our whole being cries out for them. We find ourselves judging others badly and slipping into gossip without even noticing it. We want to put time aside for prayer but with one thing and another our space is always being occupied and we get to the end of a day and have been too busy - yet again!

So the psalmist then prays: 'A pure heart create for me, O God. Put a steadfast spirit within me'. This is based on the beautiful promise which God made through the prophet Ezekiel: 'I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean ... A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my law'(Ezekiel 36:25-27).

We need to change. Only God's love poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit can change us. Now God is always loving us, and always wanting to pour into us the Spirit of his Son, Jesus. The problem is never God. God, however, waits on our readiness and our invitation. He waits on our longing. So the key to Lent is prayer. Do I really want to change? Then let me cry out to God in my distress, and open my heart to his grace. It will feel like a purifying fire because that is what it is. It will hurt to face the truth and to take a stand against temptation. But with God's grace we can do this. We cannot do it on our own, but we are not on our own. The one who knows us, loves us and offers us exactly the grace we need now to turn towards life. It is the breath of God that will fill our sails and move us towards him who is the source of all life.

When we sin seriously we cut ourselves off from grace, and so the psalmist continues: 'Do not cast me away from your presence. Do not deprive me of your holy Spirit. Give me again the joy of your help. With a spirit of fervour sustain me. O Lord, open my lips, and I shall praise you'.

When we look at our own lives or the lives of others, we recognise the need to distinguish between what we call personal sin and what we call Original Sin. Environmental and hereditary factors play a huge role in the way we live our lives. A lot of our dysfunctional behaviour, a lot of our addictions, can be largely out of our control. Perhaps we do not know any better, or we have been brought up in such a way that we simply are not able to respond in a more positive and creative way. We call this 'original' sin because it comes from our origins. It is part of what it means to be a human being in a less than perfect and often quite twisted world.

It is important to realise that while we are influenced by such factors and they exert a lot of pressure upon us, we are not simply victims of Original Sin. Baptism welcomes us into a family where grace is always present to heal, to forgive, to teach and to offer us the love that alone can help us rise above sinful situations. In this sense baptism frees us from being dominated by Original Sin by welcoming us among Jesus' disciples. The real enemy is personal sin - that is to say, the sin we commit when we freely choose against the good and in favour of what is bad. This is the real soul destroyer and it is this that adds to the pollution that poisons others.

The First Reading is a poetic imagining of the essence of personal sin as dramatically portrayed in the story of Adam and Eve and as we experience it again and again in our own lives. God is our creator. In his wisdom and love he offers us the wonderful fruit of the garden, but he warns us that if we try to eat the fruit of one particular tree we will be poisoned and die. This is the tree of independence, of self-reliance, of thinking we can exercise total control over our own lives and decide for ourselves what is right and what is wrong. God warns man and woman that we do not have the wisdom to do this. We must listen to his advice and obey his voice.

Jesus comes back to this in today's Gospel. We are hungry, but the food we need is the food offered us by God. Hence the need to listen to every word that comes from the mouth of God. We are dependent upon God for all we are and all we have. We must be like a child and rejoice in this, trusting our Father's word.

This life can often feel like a desert. Relationships are fickle. Our energy dries up. Sickness weakens our spirit. Hopes are dashed and expectations remain unrealised. Even when we experience faithful love from others, we learn that it does not, indeed it cannot, satisfy our deepest hunger. Life can be like a desert, and, as for Jesus so for us, this is a time of trial. But the desert is also a time of special intimacy. A breakdown can be a break-through. The prophet Hosea remembered the special closeness to God which the people of Israel experienced in their desert trek. He sees the sin of his contemporaries and warns them of hard times ahead. God, however, says to his people: 'I will bring you into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to you'(Hosea 2:14).

It may be hard facing up to the ways in which we sin, the ways in which we are distracted from love or run away from the truth. This time of Lent, however, can be for us, too, a time of intimacy with God - a breakthrough to grace and so to life. We can be encouraged, too, by the words of the Book of Deuteronomy: 'Surely the Lord your God has blessed you in all your undertakings; he knows your going through this great wilderness. These forty years the Lord your God has been with you; you have lacked nothing'(Deuteronomy 2:7).

Jesus taught us that God remains loving, however we might reject his love. We are always being offered the exact grace we need to live and to live to the full. As Paul insists in today's Second Reading, however bad the negative influences that have influenced us, they cannot compare with the wonderful outpouring of love and grace that comes to us from the pierced heart of Jesus. Lent is a time to focus on this truth and to listen for what God is saying to us, while seriously determining to try to do what we know we must do to stop putting off the journey of the heart which alone leads to life.