

First Sunday of Lent, Year C

The Gospel for today's Mass focuses our attention on the trials that Jesus had to face and overcome during his life. They are the same trials that the people of God faced in their journey through the desert to the Promised Land, and they are the same trials which each of us has to face on our journey.

Firstly we see him hungry. We are all hungry – for many things, but especially for love. Like Jesus we are tempted to try to satisfy our hunger on our own (make bread out of the hard stones that surround us). It doesn't work. Jesus reminds us that we do not live on bread alone: our real hunger is for communion with God. Only God can satisfy our longing. So this Lent let us resolve to follow Jesus' example and take time to be alone and allow our souls to breathe. God is offering us the Spirit of his love at each moment. Let us breathe in this Spirit, and let us breathe this love back to God. This is essentially what we mean by prayer.

Today's responsorial psalm reminds us that we are living under the protective shelter of God's care. As someone said, even the cross is really the shadow cast by God's hand blessing us. We are assured in the psalm and also in the Second Reading from Paul that if we cry to God he will answer us; if we trust him he will rescue us, protect us, save us and finally give us a share in his glory. The psalm also reminds us that God is always sending angels to us to look after us. We can be angels to each other. Angels come in the form of a letter or a phone-call, a smile, a request for help – all the many ways in which we are inspired by God to help each other.

The third temptation reminds us to distinguish carefully between trust and presumption. God promises that he will protect us. It is presumption to put God to the test by expecting him to jump through the hoops that we have created. Jesus teaches us to trust that God will care for us in the way he knows best. Jesus teaches us to wait on God. Prayer is the name we give to this attitude of waiting on God.

Likewise the central temptation is about whom we worship. When we make our decisions what do we ultimately base them on. Convenience? Pleasure? Appearances? What other's think? Or do we make our decisions ultimately on the will of God as far as we are able to discern it? Jesus teaches us to place God first and everything else will follow. If someone is first in your life you will want to spend special time with that person. If God's love for us is the most important reality in our lives, we will want to spend time with God – and spending time with God is what we mean by prayer. So, of all the resolutions we might think of making for Lent, the most important one is to resolve to set time aside to make space for prayer-communion with God.

An important element of prayer is our praying for those in need, especially for those who have asked our prayers or whose needs have moved our heart. Henri Nouwen in his retreat notes shares the following insights: 'Often I have said to people, "I will pray

for you” but how often did I really enter into the full reality of what that means? I now see how indeed I can enter deeply into the other and pray from his centre. When I really bring my friends and the many I pray for into my innermost being and feel their pains, their struggles, their cries in my own soul, then I leave myself, so to speak, and become them, then I have compassion. Compassion lies at the heart of our prayer for our fellow human beings. When I pray for the world, I become the world; when I pray for the endless needs of the millions, my soul expands and wants to embrace them all and bring them into the presence of God. But in the midst of that experience I realise that compassion is not mine but God’s gift to me. I cannot embrace the world, but God can. I cannot pray but God can pray in me. When God became as we are, that is, when God allowed all of us to enter into his intimate life, it became possible for us to share in his infinite compassion. In praying for others, I lose myself and become the other, only to be found by the divine love which holds the whole of humanity in a compassionate embrace ...Compassion belongs to the centre of the contemplative life. When we become the other and so enter into the presence of God, then we are true contemplatives. True contemplatives, then, are not the ones who withdraw from the world to save their own soul, but the ones who enter into the centre of the world and pray to God from there’ (*The Genesee Diary*,144).

However, prayer for other people’s needs can tend to take over our prayer and we can pray with anxiety and be so pre-occupied going over the sickness or the troubles of those we love, that there may be in reality very little communion with God going on. I would like here to share with you some hints that have helped me, and may help you, to find a way to express our concerns for others while at the same time not being distracted from a genuine faith-communion with God.

Begin by being aware that God loves the person for whom you wish to pray, and has been gracing them long before we thought to pray for them, that God is gracing them now, and that our desire is to be, in our prayer, in communion with all the members of the church, living and dead, praying for those for whom we wish to intercede.

Then take the person for whom we are praying into our hearts. This is the best way also to listen to people: take them and what they are saying into our hearts and listen to them there. Well, if someone has asked our prayers, take that person into our heart, and then, from our heart, hold them up to God. A strenuous effort of concentration is not required. Just simple awareness, as we might stand in the presence of a picture or of a sunset.

Now put the request aside and just be in the presence of God. We do not now have to reflect that we are there on behalf of another: we have already made that clear. We just are in the presence of God. Our intention – we do not have to reflect upon it any more – is simply that God’s love flow freely in this other person, as we hope it does in us.

To pray for others we do not have to be clever or eloquent or even perceptive of their needs; just be ourselves as we are: simple, a little confused perhaps, but wanting God’s

will, or wanting to want God's will for ourselves and others. It is God's business to take things on from there.

We are to fill the water pots with water – and we are to fill them to the brim – the wine-making is for God to do (see John 2:7-10). We are to remove the stone:<Lazarus, come forth> belongs to God (see John 11:41-44). We are the dry bones; the clothing with flesh, and the breathing upon them is God's (see Ezekiel 37:1-14).

In this way the prayers we pray for others are more trusting. We take these people into our own hearts and entrust them to the heart of God. Then the best thing we can do is not go over and over their problems, but to be ourselves in communion with God, in simple trust, and to spend the time of prayer open to God's grace and praying that God's will be done in our lives and in the world, and that we may be a vehicle of God's grace to others.

If you are wondering what resolution to take for Lent, take a hint from Jesus and get in touch with your deepest hunger. Make an appointment each day with God and keep that tie, not for saying prayers, but for being in God's presence. Our greatest Australian lyric poet, James McAuley prays:

'Incarnate Word, in whom all nature lives,
Cast flame upon the earth: raise up contemplatives
Among us, who walk within the fire
Of ceaseless prayer, impetuous desire.
Set pools of silence in this thirsty land:
Distracted men that sow their hopes in sand
Will sometimes feel an evanescent sense
Of questioning, they do not know from whence.
Prayer has an influence we cannot mark,
It works unseen like radium in the dark'(from *A Letter to John Dryden*).