

Third Sunday of Lent, Year C

I would like to focus our reflections upon the opening prayer of today's Mass. 'Father, you have taught us to overcome our sins by prayer, fasting and works of mercy. When we are discouraged by our weakness, give us confidence in your love'

It is described as a prayer for confidence in God's love and for the strength to overcome all our weaknesses. The events of daily life keep reminding us of our weaknesses, and the longer we live the more weaknesses we seem to discover. We are reminded that whatever we might do to try to overcome these weaknesses, ultimately we will succeed only to the extent that we are convinced of God's love for us and allow that love to purify and heal us.

The seventeenth century English poet John Donne expresses this powerfully in one of his so-called Holy Sonnets:

'Batter my heart, three-personed God, for you
As yet but nook, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurped town to another due,
Labour to admit you, but O, to no end.
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
but is captived and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you and would be loved fain,
But am betrothed unto your enemy.
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste except you ravish me' (Holy Sonnets v).

We cannot conquer our weaknesses on our own. Only love can release us, and only God's love can fully purify our hearts.

The same point is stressed in the Entrance Antiphon. We feel wretched and alone, so we fix our eyes on God and ask God to look upon us and be merciful. We are reminded of the scene in the Gospel where Peter has just denied Jesus. Luke tells us that he looked across the court-yard and saw Jesus looking at him. The hurt, but also the love and forgiveness in Jesus' eyes burned into Peter's heart and he went out and wept bitterly for his sins. Tears of sorrow, but also tears of release. Our resolution is to fix our eyes on Jesus. Our trust is that when we do so we will experience his love and that his love will purify and strengthen us.

The opening prayer reads: 'Father, you have taught us to overcome our sins by prayer,

fasting and works of mercy. When we are discouraged by our weakness, give us confidence in your love' What does it mean 'to overcome our sins by prayer, fasting and works of mercy'? The most common word for 'sin' used in the Bible is a word that literally means 'missing the mark'. Some suggest that its origin comes from archery or the throwing of a javelin. We aim to hit a mark, but keep missing it. Surely we can all relate to this. We would like to be reconciled with someone but we never seem to be able to find the right words. We want to apologise but we end up in an argument. We want to love someone but seem to end up causing more hurt. We resolve to get on top of a habit of gambling or some other addiction but find that we just get drawn in to the poker machine, or whatever it is, yet again.

Sometimes we miss the mark even when we know we could hit it. In other words, we sin and are responsible for doing so. Often we miss the mark because no matter how hard we try we just can't seem to hit it. Whether we are responsible or not, our lives are more messy than we would like and it is easy to be discouraged by our weakness.

Others suggest that the image behind the Biblical word for sin is that of someone walking in the bush. We miss the mark in the sense of the marked way (the track) and we find ourselves completely lost.

The opening prayer reminds us of the purpose of this season of Lent and says that God has taught us to overcome our sins. He has taught us to hit the mark or find the track by prayer, fasting and works of mercy.

Prayer is essential because prayer is fixing our eyes on the Lord. Peter would never have seen the look in Jesus' eyes if he had not been looking towards Jesus. Likewise, we will keep trying to do it on our own and failing unless we look towards God. Only confidence in his love will encourage us to keep going, and only his love makes it possible for us to overcome our weaknesses.

Fasting means going without. It means a change of routine. It focuses our attention on the external habits into which we have grown, and by denying some attraction, we keep reminding ourselves that our real hunger and need is for God. This is the idea behind giving up something for Lent. It is not so much doing without some special food or drink or luxury. It is so that when we do without it we will be reminded of God. It is a good idea to make a small prayer each time we fast.

Works of mercy are essential. Doing something special for others who are in need makes sure that we are not constantly focusing on ourselves. You remember the scene in John's gospel about Thomas. Thomas did not believe the other apostles when they told him that they had seen the risen Jesus. So at Mass the following Sunday when Thomas was with the others Jesus came to Thomas and told him to put his fingers into his wounds and to put his hand into his side. In this way Thomas learned to believe. It is the same with us. When we look outside ourselves and reach out to care for others we

are putting our fingers into the wounds of Jesus. Remember his words: 'Whenever you do this to the least of your brothers or sisters, you are doing it to me'(Matthew 25:40). Experiencing his love flowing through us to others, we also realise his love for us.

So on this third Sunday of Lent, with only four weeks till Easter, let us review how we are spending this special season. Is there some regular pleasure that I have given up as a constant reminder to myself to turn and fix my eyes on Jesus? If the answer is No, it is not too late to start. Am I on the look out for some extra way in which I can regularly reach out to others who are in need. Perhaps I might be able to visit lonely, isolated people in nursing homes? And there are other ways to avoid living a distracted, superficial and self-centred life.

The readings encourage this. The first reading is one of the most important passages of the Old Testament. Moses is drawn into prayer and comes to realise that God is truly listening to the cries of the distressed and is determined to release them from their slavery. He wants to do it through Moses. Thank God Moses listened and did something about it. He came to experience God's love and compassion for the people and also for himself. It is the same God who is drawing each of us into prayer, and we will come to the same realisation.

We Christians are privileged to be able to look at the face of Jesus and see in his eyes the love and compassion of God. The second reading reminds us that it is the same Word of God, who later became man in Jesus, who was guiding the chosen people in their journey through the desert. And it is the same Word of God, the risen Jesus, who is giving us himself as spiritual food and drink in today's Eucharist. As we fast, perhaps we could resolve to come to Mass once during the week as well for the next four weeks. There is no more intimate way of being in prayer than to open our hearts to receive Jesus in Holy Communion and experience the intimacy of his presence at the heart of our lives. We can then take his presence with us to those we meet.

Today's communion antiphon picks up this theme: 'The sparrow even finds a home, the swallow finds a nest wherein to place her young, near to your altars, Lord of hosts, my King, my God! How happy they who dwell in your house! For ever they are praising you'. The Gospel reminds us that time is running out. We just cannot keep putting things off for ever. However, God is patient and while we have life we still have time. So what about spending some time today taking stock of our lives. There are three things we can all do: we can all pray. We can all stop some habitual, unessential gratification in our lives as a way of constantly reminding us to turn to God in gratitude. We can all turn our attention sometimes away from ourselves and the demands of those around us and reach out to those whose needs we normally leave to others.

None of these three practices will in itself overcome our weaknesses or stop our missing the mark. But each of them will bring us into contact with God whose love can do more in our lives than we could ever dare to imagine. Our part in Lent is to more and more fix

our eyes on the Lord. It is what we see in his eyes that will heal and save us.