

## SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B - 2018)

The holy season of Lent begins this week with Ash Wednesday. As we all know, Lent is a time of grace and spiritual renewal. It is a time of preparation for the great feast of Easter, that day when we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

So before Lent begins, we all ought to do a bit of soul-searching. All of us, whether you are children or in high school or single adults. Whether you are newly married or have been married awhile or whether you are elderly, all should be asking, How is my relationship with God? Am I praying every day? Am I going to Mass each week? Have I been to confession recently? Am I being generous with the gifts God has given me? Do I share my time and talents and treasure? Have I done penance for my sins?"

We live in a very busy world, and we are all busy with many things, necessary things. That said, as we go about our daily affairs, if we are not careful, it's easy for us to lose perspective. Little by little we start to rearrange our priorities. Then worldly cares start to come between us and God.

Maybe we've been spending less time in daily prayer than we should. Or, we've been missing Mass here or there. Perhaps we weren't as generous as we could have been this past year. Maybe we haven't been fighting against our sinful habits like we should ...

Lent is a time to fix all this. It's a time to get our priorities straight. It's a time to set things in order, and Jesus will help us do this.

In our readings today, we hear about the disease of leprosy. This horrible disease rotted the body, and there was no cure. Leprosy was so terrible that people who came down with it were banished. Lepers had to keep away from everyone. They were separated from the community, and if they went somewhere, they were required to cry out, "unclean, unclean" so that people could get out of their way.

However, on occasion, lepers were healed, and when that happened, the Law of Moses required that they go to the priests, who would examine them and verify that they were indeed healed. Once the priest had determined that they were healed, those who had been healed were then required to go to the temple and to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving.

Today's Gospel has an example of this very thing. A leper went to Jesus and asked to be healed, and Jesus answered his prayer. Then our Lord instructed that man to go to the priest and to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving as Moses had prescribed.

Now how does this apply to us today? What is the point? The point is this: leprosy is a symbol of sin. Just as leprosy disfigured the body, that physical part to us, so too in a similar way, sin disfigures the soul, that spiritual part to us. Leprosy made the body ugly and unclean. In a similar way, sin makes the soul ugly and unclean, and in so doing, it separates us from God and His Church.

Leprosy often blinded the person and left them without sight. So too sin blinds us and leaves the soul without sight. The person who lives in a state of sin gradually forgets about God and that he was made for heaven and then his life becomes completely disordered. In a very real sense, sin is a leprosy of the soul.

That said, notice how lepers were healed. By the power of God, but with the help of the Old Testament priests. According to the law of Moses, the priest had to certify that the leper had in fact been healed. Then, once his healing had been confirmed, the former leper could offer sacrifice in the temple. This too is symbolic.

When we sin, the soul is sick, and this sickness of sin is healed by God. However, God uses the priest in the healing process. In the Sacrament of penance, we confess our sins to the priest who absolves us and who then says, "Go in peace, the Lord has freed you from your sins."

Souls sicken by sin are healed by God, but just as with the lepers, the priest must certify that the sinner has been healed. Once that happens, the forgiven sinner is once again free to participate fully in the sacrifice of the Mass and to receive Holy Communion.

What a beautiful way God has with us! Truly the Lord is kind and merciful! Truly, He pardons all our iniquities; He heals all our ills. Not according to our sins does He deal with us, nor does He requite us according to our crimes. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.

You know, it's easy for us to get comfortable with certain sins in our lives or even to make peace with them. Fortunately, the Church understands human nature, and that's why we have this season of Lent. Its purpose is to help us root out sin and to overcome our bad habits. It's a great season of grace where we seek out God's healing and forgiveness in a special way.

Traditionally, Lent has been a time of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. These three things especially help us overcome sin and get on with our spiritual lives by refocusing our spiritual energies. They also help us get ready for Easter, the holiest day of the year. By way of conclusion then, let me take a moment to review each of these three Lenten practices.

First there is prayer and prayer is simply talking to God; it's essential for our spiritual lives. Even our Lord felt the need to pray to His Father, and He did so often (Mk 6:46, Mk 14:32, Lk 23:34, etc.). Without prayer, our love of God will grow cold and can even die out.

So this Lent, plan to spend extra time in prayer. Make some serious time for prayer every day, at least 15 minutes, and don't say that's too long. If you don't have time for God, you're too busy. Also, when you pray, give God your full attention. Go to some quiet place where you can be alone with God and don't take your electronic devices with you.

Here are some suggestions. Say a daily Rosary; go to daily Mass (or even just one day a week extra). Come to Adoration or go to Stations of the Cross. Ponder the meditations in the Word Among Us Booklet.

Second is fasting, and fasting is hard work. Nobody likes being hungry. And yet Jesus presumes that we fast from time to time. At one point He said, "When you fast ... (Mt 6:16)." He Himself gave us an example when he went into the desert and fasted (Lk 4:1-2). We see that the apostles also fasted (Acts 13:2-3). Indeed, fasting and abstinence have always been a part of Christian life. In fact, the forty days of Lent were derived from Christ's fast of forty days.

Fasting is a form of self-denial, and it's one way of doing penance for our sins. That is why the Church has us fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday and why we abstain from meat on all the Fridays of Lent.

Besides fasting, we should all practice some form of self-denial during Lent. This might be by giving up something you enjoy, like your favorite TV program or movies or candy or beer or gambling. It could also be by doing something extra such as visiting the sick or those in nursing homes or studying your faith.

Self-denial and penance strengthen us so that when faced with temptations, we can more readily resist them. Just as our bodies grow stronger when we exercise, so too, our souls grow stronger when we do penance. That is why you could call fasting spiritual exercise. By denying ourselves what is permitted, we grow stronger so that we can resist what is not.

One last thing we do in Lent is called almsgiving. This means giving away our own money or goods, that is, what we have made and what we possess ourselves, to the poor out of Christian charity (which is another name for love of neighbor).

Notice too that giving alms is not just an option but a duty for us. Jesus told us, "When you give alms ... (Mt 6:2)." He didn't say if you give alms, or perhaps as an afterthought, if it occurs to you to give something to the poor ... No, He said *when you give ...*

The reason for almsgiving is so that we don't grow too attached to the things of this world. That's because our things and stuff divide us from God. Almsgiving helps us overcome the attachments we might have to the things of this world. Almsgiving frees us so that we have more room for God in our hearts. It also helps us develop a greater trust in God, a dependence on Him. By it we come to see that all we have has come from Him and that He will always give us what we need. In other words, it's not all up to us.

So, before you begin Lent this week, sit down and make some Lenten resolutions for yourself. Do this before Ash Wednesday. Resolve to do something hard so that you can feel what you're doing. Really work on your spiritual life, and God will help you.

As you think about what you are going to do, think about your prayer life and how you can improve it. For penance, think about something you really like and set that aside for Lent. Also, don't forget to give something to the poor. Finally, get to confession. These things heal us from the leprosy of sin. By prayer, penance and almsgiving and by a worthy confession, we will make ourselves ready for the great feast of Easter. Amen.