

Homily for Sunday, February 27, 2021

This is the final weekend in Ordinary time for a while. Starting Wednesday, we enter our annual period of purification we call “Lent.” In our rhythm of fasting and feasting, these approximately forty days (by my count actually forty-six days) of penance are preparation for the fifty days of Easter celebration.

Our readings today are not specifically designed to prepare us for Lent. They regularly prepare us and teach us and encourage us in our Christian faith. But their message is all the more focused at this time leading to Lent.

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Our First Reading and Psalm today were chosen by the Church to reflect some of the main themes of today’s Gospel. What comes out of us shows what is inside us.

Bishop Daniel Mueggenborg of Reno Diocese ponders that Jesus’ teachings are particularly geared to all of us as we are leaders of each other. This might be something to think about for those of us preparing for Confirmation. Through the sacrament of Confirmation, the Holy Spirit empowers us in our interactions - with each other and everyone else in the world.

The bishop puts it this way, “The first thing Jesus cautions against is the temptation to be presumptuous in our leadership of others (see the parable of the blind leading the blind in vs 39). Disciples are called to be leaders of others in the ways of faith and we should NOT casually exempt ourselves from the responsibility of such leadership. However, neither should we assume this initiative without carefully preparing ourselves for the task. If we ourselves are blind then we cannot very well lead others who are also blind.”

He also says this:

“Jesus wants us to maintain an essential balance between faith as an interior reality and faith as an exterior work. It is significant that Jesus identifies good deeds and not good words as the necessary fruit of a good person. Actions, not speech, define someone’s true convictions. It is helpful to periodically evaluate our actions as an indicator of our character and discipleship. The question is not ‘do I produce good fruit?’ but rather ‘do I consistently produce only good fruit?’”

My Brothers and Sisters, we do well to remember that this Lent is not about doing various unrelated actions. Our choices for Lent are to be focused on letting Christ improve our discipleship, that we may “consistently produce only good fruit.”

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Our Second Reading today from Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians reminds us that at the Second Coming – at the general Resurrection of the Dead – we will be changed, and God will fulfill what He has begun in Christ’s Resurrection. As Paul puts it,

“When this which is corruptible clothes itself with incorruptibility and this which is mortal clothes itself with immortality, then the word that is written shall come about:

Death is swallowed up in victory.

Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”

As we enter into the coming period of Lent, we practice what Paul gave as a conclusion of these thoughts. Because of God’s victory, which even will include the end of death itself in our human experience, Paul can urge us on. He says,

“Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be firm, steadfast, always fully devoted to the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

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Today’s Second Reading is one of the many selections offered for Funerals. When this passage is used, I sometimes include the following reflection from Saint Baldwin of Canterbury, who lived in the twelfth century. I end with it today.

Death is strong, for it can rob us of the gift of life. Love too is strong, for it can restore us to a better life.

Death is strong, for it can strip us of this robe of flesh. Love too is strong, for it can take death’s spoils away and give them back to us.

Death is strong, for no man can withstand it. Love too is strong, for it can conquer death itself, soothe its sting, calm its violence, and bring its victory to naught. The time will come when death is reviled and taunted: *O death, where is your sting? O death, where is your victory?*

Love is as strong as death because Christ's love is the very death of death. Hence it is said: *I will be your death, O death! I will be your sting, O hell!* Our love for Christ is also as strong as death, because it is itself a kind of death: destroying the old life, rooting out vice, and laying aside dead works.

Our love for Christ is a return, though very unequal, for his love of us, and it is a likeness modeled on his. For *he first loved us* and, through the example of love he gave us, he became a seal upon us by which we are made like him. We lay aside the likeness of the earthly man and put on the likeness of the heavenly man; we love him as he has loved us. For in this matter *he has left us an example so that we might follow in his steps.*