

1st Sunday of Lent – Homily by Fr. Dan Donovan (Feb. 22, 2015)

Lent, as a distinctive period or **season of the liturgical year**, has had a long and varied history. Originally it was a time of immediate and intense preparation on the part of adults who were to be baptized at the Easter vigil. Baptism and Easter have been connected almost from the beginning.

When Europe became overwhelmingly Christian, adult baptisms gradually died out and infant baptism became the norm. As a result, Lent took on a different meaning. It became a period of **penance and conversion**, of spiritual and moral renewal, a kind of church-wide retreat in preparation for the solemn celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus at Easter. In our own day, that celebration includes a renewal of our baptismal commitment.

Although in our culture, **Lent has all but disappeared** from the consciousness of many, it remains very much alive in the liturgy where it invites us to reflection, self-examination, and an ever deepening conversion.

In today's Gospel, Mark sums up in a single sentence what he considers to be the heart of the preaching of Jesus. "The time is fulfilled," Jesus says, "and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news."

Although the message of Jesus has implications for almost every aspect of human life, both individual and societal, its primary focus is on God and on God's relationship to the world and to humanity. The time that Jesus says is fulfilled is the time of promise, the time of waiting and longing. The kingdom or reign of God is not just at hand, it is breaking into the world in the life and ministry of Jesus. In him God is in our midst offering forgiveness and new life. It is this, Jesus says, that makes his preaching good news.

It is important to remind ourselves that **Christianity** is not primarily something that we do, not primarily laws or rules or commandments, not even the commandments to love God and our neighbour. It is, rather, **something that God does for us**. In Jesus, he reveals himself as a God of infinite and self-giving love, a God of forgiveness and compassion, a God who is on the side of life and goodness, on the side of the poor and of those who suffer.

What is asked of us, Jesus says, is to **“repent and believe in the good news.”** The Greek word translated here as “repent” means to be converted, to undergo a change of mind and heart. What this implies is as important today as when Jesus first proclaimed it. It could easily stand as a kind of motto for Lent.

The experience of conversion can come in many forms. For some it is from no religion to a religion, from a total lack of faith to a deep and transforming sense of the reality of God and, in a Christian context, of what he has done for us in Christ. Think of Paul or St Augustine or of so many others including people today who have undergone similar experiences.

For others, **conversion** involves not so much an initial embrace of a religious view and way of life as it does a more serious commitment to them. Many of us were baptized as infants and have been more or less faithful to what baptism involves. At different times, however, we may have realized that our faith and practice were somewhat mechanical, more a result of habit than of any strong sense of the reality at the heart of them. That realization can lead to what is called a second conversion, an experience shared by many Saints including Ignatius of Loyola and Teresa of Avila.

For most of us, however, conversion is less sudden and less dramatic. Instead of happening all at once, it takes place gradually. It is a process of which at certain moments we

become more aware. Our sense of God is deepened, our awareness of Jesus and of his continuing presence to us in the eucharist, in the Scriptures and in our hearts, is intensified.

Lent invites us to think about where we stand in regard to our faith and to our practice of it. What was adequate to us as children is no longer adequate to us as adults. Very little in our culture does anything to help us in regard to faith. It tends to be, at best, indifferent to it; at worse, it mocks it as old-fashioned and out of date.

Faith, ultimately, is a gift of God, a gift included in the new life that is ours in Christ. It is something of which I become particularly conscious in talking to morally good people who have no explicit faith but who are often looking for it.

If faith is a gift, we have to accept and nourish it and above all live in accordance with it. St. Paul once summed up the Christian life with the phrase “faith working through love,” faith producing in our life the fruit of love.

Faith grounds us in the reality of God and his gifts. The more real our faith is, the more will it spill over into a way of life that reflects the life and teaching of Jesus. Teresa of Avila once remarked that the test of authenticity of one’s prayer is growth in humility before God and in love and service of one’s brothers and sisters. The same could be said of faith.

Doing something by way of a **Lenten practice** – setting aside a regular time for prayer or the reading of Scripture, fasting, almsgiving – doing such things can remind us that we are in a **season of renewal and conversion**, a time for growth in faith and love. The more we enter into the spirit of Lent, the more profoundly will we be drawn at Easter into the saving and transforming mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection and into the way of life to which we are committed by our baptism.