**First Sunday of Lent, Cycle A**

February 29- March 1, 2020

Gn 2: 7-9; 3: 1-7; Rom 5: 12-19; Mt 4: 1-11

I have often said that Lent is my favorite season of the Church year. It is a time of change, new ways of living, a time of great hope, because we know the end of the story, so to speak, we know how it all comes to a conclusion, how the more somber days of Lent are transformed into the stunningly brilliant days of Easter.

Darkness into Light

Old into New

Slavery into Freedom

Temptations into Victories

Sin into Holiness

Death into Life

The Crucifixion into the Resurrection

Yes, we must embrace Lent fully, not shy away from it, not ignore it, not neglect it, because the only way to Easter joy is through Lent. The only way to maturity in Christ is through Lenten adolescence, Lenten youth. Yes, we mature in Lent if we embrace and practice Lent. Without it, we remain mere children, adolescents at best.

There is a sure way to maturity in our spiritual lives. The Church has always taught this. The saints have always lived this. Jesus himself commanded this. The way to spiritual maturity is the Lenten practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

What is prayer, if not loving God and spending time with him? Prayer is loving God. If you love God, you are praying. If you do not love God, the way to start loving him is to choose to pray. Pray like you believe even if you struggle to believe. If you aren’t sure about God, then say to him, “If you are real, move my heart a little. Let me love a little more.” If you do believe, then enjoy spending more time with God this Lent and rest in his presence. Say anything to him. Go deep somedays; keep it superficial on other days, but love him regardless and be with the one you love.

What is fasting if not becoming aware of how much we need God, how much we depend on him, how weak we are without him or away from him. One of the great heresies in the world today is a heresy that has been around for over 1500 years. It is the heresy that I don’t need God’s grace, I can make in on my own efforts if I only do the right things and work hard enough at it. We all fall into this error at times. We live as is we are God. We think like we are God. “If only I was more disciplined. If only I prayed more prayers. If only I did more severe penances, I would get to heaven.” All these things – prayers, discipline, penance and the like – are good and necessary in this life, but they alone don’t get us to heaven. Only God’s mercy and grace, and our cooperation with his grace and mercy, will get us home. So when we fast, when we eat simple meals, abstain from meat, refrain from habits we have developed, we come face to face with our weaknesses, our frailties, and we are filled with the awareness that we need God and that he is always with us.

What is almsgiving if not treating others like we ought treat God? In almsgiving, whether it is giving money to the poor, or repaying a just debt, or giving food to the food shelf, or visiting the sick, or sharing our time and talent with our parish family, we are only dong what simple justice would dictate, i.e., to give others what is their due out of love and need, to see in the face of a particular preson the presence of God whom we have first loved in prayer, and to whom we have attached ourselves in fasting.

Do you want the darkness in your life to become light?

Do you want to be renewed?

Do you want to be really and truly free?

Do you want to be fulfilled and have new life?

When you die, do you want to live in eternal happiness?

Then, embrace Lent this year. Grow into spiritual maturity. Pray and love God. Fast from whatever keeps you proud or self-sufficient in the spiritual life. Give to others what is their due out of love for God himself.

Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving are the ways to spiritual maturity. They are the traditional practices of Lent.

May God bless each of you abundantly this Lent.