

From The Pastor

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, and the beginning of Lent. You should have received through the mail a schedule of our Lenten offerings and service schedule. I certainly encourage you to take advantage of any or all of these opportunities to mature in your closeness and appreciation of the Lord.

I will again offer a four week Lenten series; this year reflecting on the Sunday gospels in a more in depth way. After each reflection, we will offer a time of Taize prayer. This quiet, reflective prayer style was offered last year and was well received. Preceding these evenings of reflection will be a Soup Supper in the parish hall. It is a meaningful way to mark the Lenten season with a more simple meal, and to commit the time to ponder the rich themes of the season.

Our faith tradition blesses us with the wisdom of this annual time of renewal for all God has done for us in Christ Jesus. Through prayer, fasting, and works of charity our hearts are pruned to more readily perceive and respond to the power of God in us through Jesus. This is not a heavy-handed season that demands harsh penance so that we may more worthily attain God's mercy. The season is more about acknowledging our sins and surrendering them to the victory of the Cross and its power of love. In this mood, one could, for instance, focus on the theme of gratitude for the gift of Jesus, rather than a weighted mood of sadness for sin. Repentance means to look again and rethink the transformation of the world and human relations in the surpassing love of Christ and his redemption.

The Lenten season by nature focuses on baptism, culminating in the renewal of baptismal promises at Easter. The point is to remind us that we now have new life in the Risen Christ. One could fruitfully spend the forty days of Lent pondering the presence of the risen Lord in their life. We tend to image and relate to Jesus in his human condition in the historical context of his time on earth. However, Jesus is now risen and is in his glorified body and relates to us in this way through the Holy Spirit. Consider pondering the light and freedom, the power and the joy of the risen Christ and his presence in your life. Jesus' time spent on the Cross for us was effective because of the love with which he suffered. Jesus is no longer on the Cross. He is risen and present to us in a new and glorified reality. This too, can be a powerful way to ponder the Lenten themes. May God bless our efforts and intentions.

Today's readings for the sixth Sunday of Ordinary time offer the contrast between those who focus life on God, against those who do not. The readings use effective images that easily convey the intended message.

Jeremiah uses strong language for those who trust only in the things of this world and have little mind for God. 'Cursed is the one who trusts in human beings, who seeks his strength in flesh (worldly things)...'. Cursed here means un-blest or un-awakened; under the weight of a blindness that obscures the light of faith or truth. It does not mean the casting of a spell caused by another person. Such blindness allows no inner peace. Such a person is constantly looking for the next thing to satisfy, having nothing that will bring true peace. 'Like a barren bush in the desert that enjoys no change of season'.

'Blest is the one who trusts in the Lord. He is like a tree planted near running water. It fears not the heat. In the year of drought it shows no distress, but still bears fruit'. This person knows the constancy of the Lord and depends on God and not on self for security and surety. To be blest is to be in God's favor, to know and seek with trust the goodness of God. In good times and in bad, the faithfulness of God is the same.

The beatitudes in Luke's gospel are more literal than in the gospel of Matthew. They are more expressive of both the experience of Jesus and the reality of so many people of his time. The blessing of the poor, the hungry, or the weeping, etc. is that they can and do trust in the providence of God. Jesus personally knew poverty, hunger, sadness, and persecution, yet remained in the peace and surety of the Father. These beatitudes are literal, yet inclusive. To be poor may mean poor in love, or justice, not just material poverty. To be hungry may mean hungry for faith, or truth, self-validation, or hunger for God. To weep may mean those who weep for an end to oppression, false imprisonment, acts of hatred, or sadness for sin against the justice of God. Such things as these include all of us.

Unlike the other gospels, Luke includes 'woes'. This parallels the curse mood in Jeremiah. Blind to their dependence on God, the rich may fail to see the deeper blessings and happiness of life. This is not a condemnation, but a call. Many well to do people generously share what they have. The call is to know the blessing of God and share in justice with those who are poor, hungry, sad, or persecuted in any expression of these needs regardless of economic status.

Our holy season is upon us. May the Word of God be our guide, so that with open hearts, we may know deeply the blessing and happiness of the Risen Christ in whom we have put all our trust.

Father John Esper