

3rd SUNDAY OF LENT – C (March 20, 2022)

If you had to summarize what this season of Lent is all about in just one word, what word would you choose? Maybe ‘fasting’? or ‘ashes’? or ‘fish on Fridays’? (OK...that’s three words...). The gospel today gives us a good candidate for such a one-word description, and that word is ‘repent’. Jesus was talking about Pilate having some Galileans killed and about a tower that fell and killed eighteen people. In those days it was often thought that those who suffered such calamities must have been guilty of some great sin which in turn led to that suffering. Jesus rejected that faulty reasoning, and then twice warned his listeners: “But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!”

What does it mean to ‘repent’? It certainly starts with a recognition of the wrong that was done or the good that was not done, but it doesn’t end there. Remember Judas Iscariot: after he betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, he recognized that he had committed a horrible sin—but he went no farther. He was filled with such bitter and despairing remorse that he ended up taking his own life.

True repentance, on the other hand, recognizes the wrong, to be sure, but it also and has to involve turning back to God and deciding to change one’s ways, actions, and attitudes. It is the decision, prompted by true sorrow for sin and a desire to trust in the grace and mercy of God, to move forward with a renewed resolve to live the gospel of Christ. Let’s say we share a bit of juicy gossip about someone, or we let loose with a tirade against a family member or co-worker for some perceived offense, or we commit any other sin against charity or virtue we are prone to. Repentance begins by owning up to it: “I messed up, I let my temper take control, I acted like a selfish brat.” But it also involves: “I really need to change my attitude; I need to pray for God’s help for patience; I need to see Jesus in that person I hurt or who I don’t like”...and then it involves doing those things and making those changes.

Back to the gospel: after Jesus gives that double challenge to repent, he also gives us a parable to illustrate an important truth about the mercy of God. The owner of an orchard saw that one of the fig trees for many years had no fruit. He told the gardener to cut it down, but the gardener urged him to let it go for one more year; he would do his best to make the tree fruitful again. If after that extra effort there were still no figs, then the tree could be cut down.

Jesus’ point: the gardener is like God who, in his loving and great patience, wants to give us every chance to repent. There are those who seem to think that God is just waiting for us to mess up so he can condemn us to eternal punishment. No! In the prophet Ezekiel we hear: “As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live” (Ez. 33:11). St. Peter says the same thing in his second letter: “[The Lord] shows you generous patience, since he wants none to perish but all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). And Jesus said: “I tell you, there will likewise be more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to repent (Luke 15:7).

But that divine patience is not infinite. We will not have eternity to decide to repent and change—that is in large part what this life on earth is about. Our opportunity to repent comes to an end at the moment of death, and none of us knows precisely when that moment will come for

any of us. At that time God will confirm for eternity the decision we ultimately make in this life: either to freely and gratefully accept the loving mercy of Jesus, or to refuse that gift. True repentance is powerful indeed, and it has eternal consequences for joy beyond our ability to imagine. The refusal to repent also has eternal consequences...and in the opposite direction.

The call to repentance and conversion is persistent throughout the gospels. Jesus is persistent in extending this call to us, precisely because of his intense, passionate, boundless love for us and his desire for our eternal joy with him in his kingdom. One of the very best and most powerful ways to respond to that call is in the sacrament of reconciliation/confession. The last few bulletins have had an extended examination of conscience taken from Archbishop Jackels' brochure on the subject; that will conclude in next weekend's bulletin. I hope you have been reading them and taking them to heart and mind. And don't forget to note in the bulletin all the extra times I am available during this Lenten season for confessions. Celebrating this sacrament is one of the very most important things that we priests do—right up there with offering the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Don't be afraid of this sacrament—there is nothing to fear. Let's all add to that joy in heaven that Jesus spoke about!

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I want to shift gears for a moment to the war in the Ukraine, now well into its fourth week. To this point, Vladimir Putin has given no sign of any willingness to stop the death, destruction and madness of his war. We can't help but admire the courage and the resolve of the Ukrainians to defend their freedom and homeland, but concern builds as to what further steps Putin will take on his own or in retaliation for Ukraine's refusal to surrender. The U.S. Bishops on Wednesday said "We are witnessing an unprecedented threat to world peace. The possibility of global warfare is compounded by the unthinkable consequences that would result from the potential use of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction." They are not exaggerating or overstating the case. The bishops also encouraged us to continue to pray for an end to this war; in their words, "prayer is never a feeble gesture of last resort! It is a weapon of hope." Let's continue to use that spiritual weapon, and that of fasting as well. And if you can help with the enormous material needs of the Ukrainian refugees, please do so. One option would be through Catholic Relief Services; see last week's bulletin for details.

Pope Francis continues his urgent pleas and prayers for peace. This coming Friday, March 25, he—in union with the bishops around the world—will consecrate Russia and the Ukraine to the Immaculate Heart of Mary for the cause of peace. This certainly calls to mind the Blessed Mother's similar request to the three children to whom she appeared in Fatima in 1917. He also offered a very solemn and sobering prayer at his general audience last Wednesday that I'd like to conclude with; I'll have the text of this prayer in next week's bulletin:

[Pope Francis, General Audience—March 16, 2022]