

REFLECTIONS
ON THE
LECTIONARY FOR LENT
2010

THE YEAR OF LUKE



Rt. Rev. Christopher Budd
Bishop of Plymouth

INTRODUCTION

The first thing that must come to mind during any Lent is the reestablishment of our proper priorities.

The overriding priority of the Christian life is God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If that priority is alive and well then our Christian life is healthy, even though we have to deal with the fallout from our sinfulness.

Lent is a good time to do this.

**‘Now is the favourable time;
this is the day of salvation’**

2 Corinthians

ASH WEDNESDAY

TAKING SIN SERIOUSLY

Joel 2, 12-18; 2 Corinthians 5, 20-62; Matthew 6, 1-6, 16-18

The invitation at the beginning of Lent, each year, is that we take sin seriously. It is a boring invitation, because sin is boring. It is a demanding invitation, because we are meant to do something about this boring and repetitive element in our lives.

We have often been told, with some truth, that our going to confession (celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation) is as boring as the sin it is meant to deal with. I wonder whether this is really the case, because we have no intention of allowing ourselves to be sufficiently disturbed by our sins so as to do something about them.

Another way we use to avoid this unpleasant issue is to reduce them to a boring, reassuring list that we hide behind whenever we can.

Above all, Lent is a time for honesty about us and our relationships, especially our relationship with God.

We have to enter this period of penitential discipline, so that we can deal with some of the roots of what is going wrong. This means we need to listen to the word of God and let it talk to the heart.

We are not in the season of “let’s pretend” or “let’s put on a show”. Both would be useless, if not harmful.

If we are prepared to recognise our sinfulness and do something about it, we need these weeks of grace where we allow the love of God to be poured into our hearts and so expose, forgive and bring some healing to us.

Lenten discipline is about changing how we live. We do it so that when we get to Easter something significant has changed for ever. Prayer, fasting and alms-giving enable us, when we do them properly, to focus on the things of God and to forget and move away from the things that are about self-gratification.

Sin locks us into ourselves; grace liberates us for love.

Pray that we receive a spirit of penitence

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

TEMPTATION

Deuteronomy 26, 4-10; Romans 10, 8-13; Luke 4, 1-13

We all need wilderness time. But beware; there is nothing romantic about it. It is not a luxury holiday, or time without any responsibility. It is a time when we are invited to deal with our demons in the place where we cannot avoid them. We can face them and own them because of the presence of God. In that presence we can acknowledge safely the things we would prefer to forget.

The Lord's temptations capture some vital elements in the life of any Christian where we are vulnerable to a clever and ruthless adversary. When confronting the Lord, Satan seems strangely incompetent. It must be because the One he tries to subvert is the only one who can see through him, and he knows it.

Even when Satan returns on Calvary and thinks he has the upper hand he is definitively put out of business by the Lord of Life on his Cross.

However, Satan can pursue us, and he does, and generally has a disconcerting amount of success.

We can think of three areas where we are particularly vulnerable to the temptations which he brings:

- Material things – we cannot live without them, and yet when we idolise them we run into considerable trouble in terms of the God we worship.
- Misuse of power – power is given to us to enable us to serve. We often use it to hurt and dominate. A lot of our sinfulness is of this nature.
- Underlying all other aspects of life is the right relationship with God. This is primarily expressed in prayer, but quite often prayer can be a cover. We can hide in it to avoid facing some unpleasant truths about ourselves, the way we live and our relationship with God.

Pray for the gift of honest repentance

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

THE LORD IS LORD!

Genesis 15, 2-12, 17-18; Philippians 3, 17-41; Luke 9, 28-36

It is worth noting that the Lord went up the mountain to pray. He is going there to do what comes naturally to him; Jesus' own reality is about prayer. Prayer is not something Jesus does from time to time; it is what he is.

What do I mean by this? Prayer is totally towards God and cannot be anything else. Jesus in his divinity is totally to his Father and the Father is totally to the Son. Their relationship in eternity constitutes the Triune God, one yet three - a reality made knowable and accessible in the incarnation of the Son. In his humanity Jesus' reality (divinity) expresses itself in prayer.

That Jesus prayed should not surprise us. It is in the first place an activity of God made man and it should not surprise us that Jesus' inner reality bursts forth into overwhelming view in this act of prayer.

Today's reading faces us squarely with who Jesus is. His identity is explicitly recognised in the text by the words of the voice from the cloud,

“This is my Son, the Chosen One, listen to him”.

Now can we, or do we, listen to him? The disciples seemed to be disorientated and it should not surprise us. They are honest – they are overwhelmed and do not deny it. Peter's suggestion sounds a little gauche. He is saying 'I would like to stop it here and stay where we are'. But Jesus has to move on, as he has a task to carry out, entrusted to him by his Father. The disciples are silent, not really knowing what to make of their experience.

The challenge to us is, are we prepared to let the presence of the Lord overwhelm us in our prayer, and to let ourselves hand over to the Lord the control of what is happening in our lives?

Our Lenten prayer is about that.

Pray for the gift of prayer

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

IT IS ABOUT REPENTANCE

Exodus 3, 1-8, 13-15; 1 Corinthians 10, 1-6, 10-12; Luke 13, 1-9

The first part of our Gospel today captures a conviction strongly present in the prevailing culture at the time of Jesus; that if something nasty happens to people they must have been involved in something that deserved punishment, namely sin. Jesus hits this firmly on the head. There is no such automatic correlation, but everyone needs to repent and change.

It is a little like the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, where Abraham could not find any just people in the town to justify the Lord sparing the town. Everyone is in need of repentance and no one can parade their justice and righteousness before God.

Lent is a great opportunity to be ready and able to identify sin in our lives and set out on the road to repentance and change. It needs in us an ability to accept the negative side of ourselves, not to be paralysed by this recognition, and to let the Lord minister to it or, as the parable puts it, manure it!

The 'application of manure' may come across as a little crude, but it means the Lord is full of mercy and compassion and is prepared to give us more time. We need it! The journey from sin is long and arduous. We do not really want to make it, and yet we do wish to arrive at the destination to which the Lord has invited us. It is so easy to miss the mark or to make choices that can only lead to eternal unhappiness and final alienation.

Lent is an opportunity to put what is wrong to rights and we must not miss out. God is full of mercy and extremely patient. We must take action.

Pray for the gift of repentance

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

WHAT IS THERE TO BE HAPPY ABOUT?

Joshua 5, 9-12; 2 Corinthians 5, 17-21; Luke 15, 1-13, 11-32

In a word, Forgiveness. The story of the father and the two sons, better known as the Prodigal Son, is one of the best known of the Lord's stories. It picks up features of human life that we would prefer to ignore. The fact of sin.

It is commonplace to say that our culture has only a weakened understanding of sin. However, this is a flawed perception. It is more accurate to say that we have a selective understanding of sin. Where we sin, we only see issues of punishment, getting even, revenge.

To some atrocities we have a very good sense of what is right or wrong and we cry "foul" and rightly look for redress. Just think for a moment about our reaction to acts of terrorism, abuse of children, crimes against humanity. Our reactions are very healthy – we will not tolerate such evil and it must be expelled from our communities.

Sin is alive and well, and in some areas of life we have a sharp sense of it. The dimension that is missing is the “Affront to God” – the transcendent dimension.

Now, what has God got to do with sin?

Sin is moral evil, which poisons our essential relationships with each other and with the One who is totally love. Sin is the opposite of love so it is the greatest insult to the one who, being love, can only love and so cannot tolerate un-love. It must be expelled from his presence.

The oddity of the parable is that the father yearns for the one who embodies everything that is evil – a totally self-centred ne'er do well. He deserves exterior darkness as a permanent state of being.

However, two things happen to give the listener to the story a sense that even sin need not be the end of the story.

The younger son “comes to his senses”. He sees the error of his ways and acknowledges the truth of his situation. Truth liberates! The father's yearning for this to happen is realised and he gives to the son a gift that only he can give – forgiveness. Repentance from the heart meets with the gift of forgiveness and creates the possibility of new life.



This is why the Church says rejoice, let's be happy, *laetare*.

There is however a shadow in this story, the older brother.

Pray for the gift of forgiveness

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

WHO WILL THROW THE FIRST STONE?

Isaiah 43, 16-21; Philippians 3, 8-14; John 8, 1-11

This Gospel, from John this time, needs to be seen as a sort of follow-on from last week. It is about sin and how ugly sin is.

I finished last week's reflection with the elder brother without comment. He fits in well with the crowd that brought today's woman, "an adulteress", to the Lord for condemnation. Their principal agenda is to trap the forgiveness man, Jesus. They wanted the woman's blood, but even more Jesus' blood.

Forgiveness of sins was not a part of their world. Their mind was dominated by themselves, the righteous. They saw themselves as so good that God should be proud of them. Their sin was that they were prisoners of their own goodness. They had lost touch with the source of that goodness and failed to see that their attitudes to the woman revealed the evil in their own hearts.

In short, they were in a worse place than the woman. She had to face the evil of her life, adultery, but they thought what they were doing was good, when in fact it was bad. Evil has to thrive, when it is seen as good.

The forgiveness man, Jesus, does two amazing things – he offers the gift of forgiveness to both the accusers and the woman. For the former he gave them the opportunity to ‘come to their senses’ and we have one of the most famous challenges in the Gospel:

“Let the one without sin throw the first stone”.

For the accusers the road to redemption has started. They withdrew one by one (starting from the oldest and possibly the wisest?). The moment of grace had arrived and they at least knew that they could no longer press charges against the woman.

The gift of forgiveness is plainer to see in the dialogue between Jesus and the woman. I will not condemn, says Jesus - words that we all need to hear - and then the invitation to the woman:

“Go and sin no more”.

Again, words that we all need to hear. Sin is the death of goodness and we need to be liberated (forgiven) so that we can sin no more, live in a new way.

The thrust of forgiveness is that we can live again. It does not say we can pretend we have not sinned. It says our sinfulness is not the final word about us and that we can live again, and by doing good unravel the effects of the evil we have done hitherto.

Lent is about allowing the Lord, through his Spirit, to move us to recognise our sin, repent it and live a new life in which the effects of sin can be dealt with.

Pray for the gift of truth about ourselves

PALM SUNDAY

OF PALMS AND PASSION

Luke 19, 28-40; Isaiah 50, 4-7; Philippians 2, 6-11; Luke 26: 14-27:66

As we move into Palm Sunday of the Passion of Christ, we can start talking about the beginning of the end of Jesus' earthly life and the end of the beginning in regard to the movement of redemption; as the Lord goes to his death the prospect of life looms.

Out of death comes life, the constant theme of the essential events of our redemption. Out of death and sin comes life. The agent of all this is a love, so great and reliable, that we can only call it divine. Jesus is and lives that; it is his total identity.

Today we to have two places to focus our attention. The first is the entrance of Jesus into the city, Jerusalem, the place where God dwells with his people and yet where the final drama between their God and the forces of evil takes place.

Often Jerusalem had been the place where the powers against God got their way. Yet now with the coming of Christ, "*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord*", it is about to witness that final battle. Christ seemingly loses it all and yet wins it all, once and for all. Today, as in all good liturgy, we take part in this event. We remember it in that strong sense of making it present now.

The other major focus of the day is the Proclamation of the Passion. This is the central drama of our faith and we need to **listen** to it being proclaimed. It is not a passion play, but a Proclamation and we need to allow this proclamation to speak to 'the heart'. It is about letting it so speak to us again that we want to take up the Cross and follow Jesus the Lord.

It is important to keep in view during Holy Week that we celebrate what the Lord, and only the Lord, has done for us. We are totally recipients of grace.

Pray for the grace to accept God's gift
of redemption

MONDAY TO WEDNESDAY (HOLY WEEK)

These days invite us to direct our attention to the Suffering Servant. We have these readings:

- Monday Isaiah 42: 1-7
- Tuesday Isaiah 49: 1-6
- Wednesday Isaiah 50: 4-9

Our personal prayer and meditation on these days could well be before a crucifix. We could let that central symbol of our redemption speak to us in the quiet of our homes and in the quiet of our hearts.

Perhaps a little domestic ritual of lighting a candle by the crucifix may help the meditation and our focus.

Lent ends as the Triduum begins.

THE EASTER TRIDUUM

Thursday - The Lord's Supper

Exodus 12: 1-8, 11-14; 1 Corinthians 11: 23 -26; John 13: 1-50

Our reflective prayer today can focus on the meaning and gift of the Eucharist and Priesthood made to the Church. In celebrating Mass this evening we are aware of the gift that Christ has left to his Church – to be able to access everything that Christ stands for in sacramental signs.

We have a lovely saying: the Eucharist makes the Church and the Church the Eucharist. Maundy Thursday is the day when we can appreciate this without any distractions.

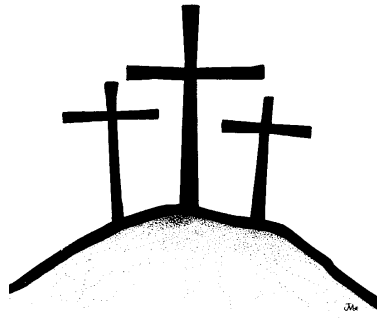
“Do this in memory of me” is an invitation that will resonate each day of our lives, whether we can actually take part in Mass or not.

A ritual action peculiar to this day, the washing of the feet, captures the essence of the Eucharistic life that every Christian is called to live. If we celebrate Christ's self-giving, to and for us, we commit ourselves to a way of life that is for others.

It can seem strange that the same Eucharist that we celebrate each day is given such a high profile on this day. Or is it? The gift of the Eucharist and Priesthood are so precious that they are a constant and totally reliable presence in the Church of Christ himself.

Opportunities to appreciate the gift in prayer are made possible at the altar of repose. The time at that altar should be predominantly quiet. The prayer of contemplation seems to be the most appropriate form of prayer for this evening.

Pray in thanksgiving for the gift of the Eucharist
and the gift of Priesthood



Behold the wood of the Cross
on which our Saviour hung
– come let us adore him”.

Good Friday – Celebration of the Lord's Passion

Isaiah 52, 13-53; Hebrews 4, 14-16; John 18, 1 – 19, 42

Friday is not meant in any way to be a day of gloom and doom. We must be aware of the horrendously destructive nature of human sinfulness. We see around us the destruction of sin, in people's lives and in the whole of creation. There is much we can see daily that will tell the story of human sinfulness. Truth forces us to acknowledge this.

However the dire consequences of sin are particularly seen in the mangled body of Jesus on the Cross. If we wanted to understand what sin is about, look at its consequences for Jesus.

There is however another aspect of Jesus' cruel death that Good Friday picks up – The Wood of the Cross. Notice that the focus is on the Wood of the Cross which becomes the Tree of Life. From death comes life – a regular theme during the days of Easter.

At the centre of our liturgy is the veneration of the Cross:

“Behold the wood of the Cross
on which our Saviour hung
– come let us adore him”.

The context of this veneration is the Proclamation of the scriptures, culminating in the Passion according to John. Hearing yet again the proclamation of the death of the Lord, we can reconnect with those events of our redemption.

On Good Friday there is a strong connection between the wood of the Cross and Communion. In Communion we are put in intimate contact with the One who used the wood of the Cross so that we may have life. That life will always be an Easter life because we have an Easter Jesus.

The general intercessions of this day keep before us that the Lord died for all. The catholicity of God’s love revealed by Christ will always mean that no one is excluded in advance.

Pray today for the whole world

Holy Saturday to Easter Sunday

May I suggest that, if the circumstances of your life permit, you try to treat Holy Saturday as a quiet day of prayer. If a whole day is difficult, do perhaps find an hour to pray meditatively in the early morning or evening.

There are many readings from scripture that you can use and pray with.

From the Vigil Liturgy:

Genesis 1, 11-22; 22, 1-18; Exodus 14, 15 – 15:1; Isaiah 54, 5-14;
Isaiah 55, 1-11; Baruch 3, 9-15, 32-44; Ezekiel 36, 16-28;
Romans 6, 3-11; Luke 24, 1-12

From Easter Sunday:

Acts 10, 34 & 37-43; Colossians 3, 1-4; 1 Corinthians 5, 6-8; John 20, 1-9

Above all, if you can, come and join the celebration of the liturgy. It is long, but being in the evening into the night it may be possible to give that time.

A) Darkness to Light

The dark of night gives a powerful statement about where the whole celebration starts: the death of Jesus and our exiled condition in sin and death.

A Blazing Fire – Beauty, Warmth & Light helps form Community. Purification and judgement are here symbolised and are life giving.

The Paschal Candle – Drawn from the Fire – A Clear Symbol of the Presence of the Risen Christ. It is carried solemnly in procession with the triple acclamation, “*The Light of Christ*” and its joyful rejoinder, “*Thanks be to God*” (Deo Gratias).

The Exultet - The climax of this section. It is a hymn rich with poetry, well worth pondering in advance of the actual celebration. Perhaps this also could be among the things we use for meditative prayer.

B) Liturgy of the Word

The texts we use are noted earlier. Whenever we proclaim the scriptures we tell in part at least our story, which is the story of the Lord’s dealings with us. As we live we are a part of that story and we need to return to our roots.

The Old Testament section culminates with the singing of the Gloria, the great hymn of Thanksgiving, followed by a New Testament reading and the proclamation of the Easter Gospel.

The Gospel is introduced by the solemn restatement of the Alleluia – Easter has arrived with a vengeance and the challenge of the Homily is to unpack this message in the context of our here and now.

C) The Sacraments of Initiation

These are the fruits, gifts and blessings that flow from the Easter Jesus. These gifts form the foundation of the community - Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist. These sacraments form a permanent gift to the Church and ensure she will always remain the community of Christ, made alive by the gift of the Spirit.

We celebrate through:

- The Blessing of Baptismal Water

- The Baptism of Adults

- The Renewal of Baptismal Promises

- Reception and Confirmation of those coming into full communion, or those who have been baptised.

This puts us in touch with where it all started in the Resurrection of Jesus.

The Eucharist – the source and summit of everything we do and are - is the culmination of the Sacraments of Initiation and will be the ongoing act of thanksgiving to the Lord that sees us through the whole of our lives.

D) Easter Day Mass is Easter Day Mass

This is often a time for the baptism of infants and will always provide an opportunity for people to renew their baptismal promises, especially those who were not present at the Easter Vigil.

Particularly expressive of what Easter is all about is the beautiful sequence, "*Victimae Paschali Laudes*", well worth singing either in English or the original Latin.

Easter Day sets the tone for the next fifty days during which we rejoice in the Lord's goodness and mission that flows from that.

The Lord has risen, Alleluia

Alleluia.

Haec dies quam fecit dominus.

Exultemus et laetemur in ea.

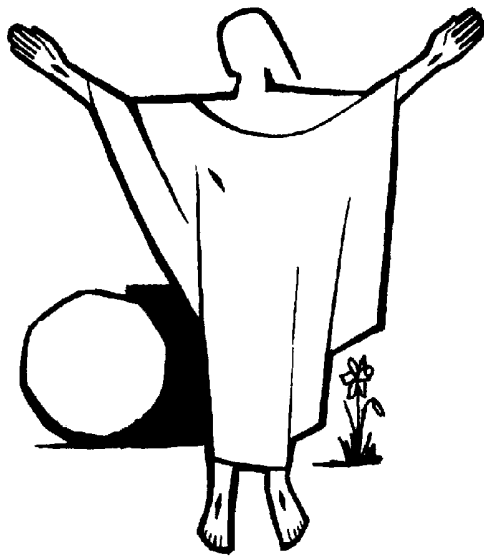
Alleluia.

Alleluia.

This is the day the Lord has made.

Let us exult and rejoice in it.

Alleluia.



Bishop's House
Plymouth