

Sunday Homily

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

28 FEBRUARY 2021

YEAR B

“For what will it profit them to gain the whole world
and forfeit their life?”

Mark 8:36

Illustration

Last week, in our Gospel reading, Jesus was baptised by John and a voice from heaven, the voice of God, declared that Jesus was “my Son, the Beloved”. After this act of commitment and affirmation Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness to work out the implications of his revealed identity and how to live out that identity in accordance with God’s will.

Mark doesn’t go into details of the temptations Jesus faces, but from Matthew and Luke we get an idea of what they were: the temptation to be a Messiah of miracles and dramatic signs; to perform superhuman feats to prove that God will protect him and to take for himself kingship and power over all the known world.

Jesus deals with each of these temptations in turn and holds steadfastly to his commitment to do things God’s way and not his own.

Gospel Teaching

This week we see a similar pattern of events, this time involving the disciples of Jesus, especially Peter.

Peter has just made his memorable declaration that Jesus is the Messiah. His voice echoes the voice of God claiming Jesus as his Son, the Beloved.

Jesus now tries to teach the disciples what he understands the role of the Messiah to be: a painful understanding reached through hardship in the wilderness and a great personal struggle with temptation.

Peter has not gone through this process as Jesus has. For him, and the others, it is still quite inconceivable that God’s Anointed One should suffer and die; it goes against everything they have always believed about the Messiah. Even after all these centuries, it is no easier for us to understand the strange form that God’s victory takes.

Now Peter’s voice echoes the voice of the tempter in the wilderness. Jesus once again hears that voice disguised in the voice of a friend which is perhaps much more difficult to resist.

Once again, Jesus turns on the one he calls Satan, who is using Peter to undermine his integrity and strength of purpose. Once again, Jesus insists that it is the things of God, the divine things, that must come first, not self-interest and worldly concerns.

Then Jesus has to explain to his disciples, and to us, what it will cost to follow him and to try to live like him.

Application

Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me."

Especially in Lent we perhaps tend to think that "denying ourselves" is something to do with giving up things we enjoy, be it wine, chocolates, music, dancing or television. Or we might even think of it as some kind of punishment for our sins. But perhaps there's a different way of understanding it.

We don't know what form "Satan" took when Jesus was in the wilderness, but it clearly was something Jesus recognised as being in opposition to God. In our Gospel reading it's the voice of Peter that tries to pull Jesus away from his intended path.

Now Jesus is saying to those around him, and to us, that if we're serious about following him we are going to have to resist our own inner voice which tries to distract us. And that won't be easy. Our own inner demons know only too well where our particular weaknesses lie and they may have nothing to do with chocolate, wine or time-wasting.

Perhaps our weaknesses lie in enjoying gossip, hearing and passing on rumours; making judgements without knowing the whole story; reacting with impatience when we're inconvenienced in some way, or breaking rules for our own advantage.

We each have our very own temptations and failures and these are what we need to deny ourselves: the things we need to recognise and bring to God asking for forgiveness, healing and the grace to begin again.

Jesus' message is that having everything we want and having everything going our way is worthless if in achieving that we have sacrificed our integrity, our honesty and our identity as God's beloved child in whom he is well pleased.

Similarly the message is that even if our lives in worldly terms seem lacking in achievement, possessions, or status, if we still have our integrity, are being our true selves and following what we believe to be God's will for us, then we have a life caught up in divinity and in the eternal kingdom of God.