

## Quinquagesima Sunday

Dearly Beloved,

Today, we mark Quinquagesima Sunday, the last Sunday before Lent begins. The Church has given us this season of two and half weeks, in order to prepare us for Lent, the season of penance and purification, for it is the acceptable time in which we make up for our negligence the rest of the year. If we spend Lent badly or lazily, we will suffer grave spiritual misfortune; many of us struggle spiritually even now because we wasted the previous Lent.

In order to avoid this, the Mass readings for these three Sundays have been purposefully intense: the parable of the workers in the vineyard, reminding us that we must work at our salvation and not assume we will receive the reward of eternal life; the parable of the sower, reminding us that we can be dried up by temptation and trial or choked by desire for riches and comfort; and today's account, which serves as a sort of parable in that although the blind man certainly existed as an historical person, we also gain much fruit from considering him as a sign of our own situation.

The story of the blind man on the road is deliberately placed at this time in the calendar because Jesus is passing by, on His way to Jerusalem, and thus on the way to Calvary. Like the man whom Jesus healed, we are blind. Our sins, our selfishness, our attachment to comfort and pleasure and possessions all produce a sort of slime on the eyes of our heart that hardens as the months go by.

Lent is a time for asking Christ to take away that blindness that we may follow Him; we may claim to see the rest of the year, even if that is not true, but during Lent, if during no other time, we should be honest. God receives Lent as a tithe for the rest of the year; a tenth of the days to offset our usual spiritual sluggishness. Our hearts are cleansed through the generosity and pain of sustained fasting, prayer, and almsgiving so that we may see again: see the true gravity of our sins, see Jesus that we may follow Him, see the Cross as a door to the Resurrection.

The blind man stands as a parable for our spiritual state, and because of that, can help us in living Lent to the full as a time of spiritual cleansing. First, the blind man is not aware of other men's blindness; he knows only his own. This is what our spiritual lives should consist of: admittance of our sinfulness while extending mercy upon others. Instead we too often focus on the speck in another's eye and overlook the beam in our own. Unfortunately, the current situation in the Church and in the US government encourage us to seek out and to condemn blindness in others, and this habit can easily bleed into relationships in our families and workplaces. We permit ourselves to habitually pass judgment on another's blindness—our spouse, our parent, our child, our co-worker—and never make any real effort to break that habit. We assume the other person lacks good judgment, is lazy, or has bad motives and we never take the time to consider their actions and choices from their point of view, given their temperament, their weaknesses, their way of relating to God. Now is a good time to ask Christ to help us see that in looking down upon the other person's blindness, we have proven ourselves to be blind. As St. John says in his second letter, "He who loves his brother abides in the light, and in it there is no cause for stumbling. But he who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes."

A second truth the blind man teaches us is that we depend upon others for nearly everything. In the Gospel, the man must be told that Christ is passing by, and we learn from Mark's account that he also had to be told that Christ was calling him to come to him. Our material and spiritual lives are a network of support, much of which we overlook or fail to appreciate. And then there are times in which we resent needing help because we resent our weakness. As the book of Revelation says, "You say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked." The blind man shows us that dependence upon others is normal to human life and also praiseworthy if it is a vehicle to understanding our own limitations and in growing in nearness to Our Lord. The crowd, though some discouraged him, did tell the

blind man that Jesus was near and then they facilitated his approach to Him, and therefore were instrumental to his healing. So also the love and support we receive from our families, our friends, and our fellow Christians is a sign of God's love for us. There are many times when we think God is silent when in fact He is speaking to us through the words or actions of a human being. He uses them as an instrument to love us. In spiritual terms, it is the prayers of others, both on earth and in heaven, who sustain us; our perseverance is tied undeniably to those who, in their love for us, cry out to God that we may be saved, be converted, be strengthened, be consoled. Our pride often keeps us from seeing this, but humble gratitude clears our eyes to see the cloud of witnesses upholding us.

A final, and most important truth of which the blind man reminds us, is the importance of desire for a pure heart and desire for God. When the blind man knew that Jesus was passing by, he did not ask for food or money; he knew whom he was addressing and so he asked well. His desire was rightly ordered; once he encountered someone who could grant his desire, he asked Him at once. Because our lives are hard, hard because of the normal difficulties of life in a fallen world—strained relationships, financial troubles, fatigue and anxiety—and doubly hard because we live in a post-Christian world which does not share our moral or religious values, we become accustomed to having small desires. We come to want things like success in business or a peaceful home life or better physical health, all of which are good things but too little for men and women of faith. Even if we had all we wanted of such things, we would not be happy; our hearts are restless until they rest in God, and that will principally occur in the next life, when we will see God as He is. That vision will fill our minds and hearts will the fullness we yearned for but could never articulate.

The blind man, then, shows us that our principal desire should be to see Jesus. When the blind man opened his eyes, he saw the Lord. So, too, we should want to see the One who has loved us and given His life for us. We have served Him in faith; we should desire to see Him face to face. So when Jesus asks us, as He does every day, what we want Him to do for us, we should respond well. Lord, that I may see: first, that I may see my sinfulness as you see it, so that I may have a pure and contrite heart; and second, that I may see all the ways in which you uphold me, in the sacraments, in the Scriptures, in the prayers of friends and the help of the Saints, so that I may never lose the virtue of hope, and thus persevere to the end. Though we are not always in a state that allows us to easily say such a prayer, we can at least recognize that our yearnings for peace, for security, for love are all yearnings for God and the joy of being able to rest in Him definitively. This can help us to see that though we are blinded by our sins, our hearts are purified each time we renew our desire for God, and that renewal can be as simple as saying the words of the blind man, Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me.

So, let us undertake Lent with generosity and courage, realizing it is a gift from the Lord, a chance to make amends, an opportunity to grow in faith, hope and charity, which we so desperately need in this fallen world. And then, when Jesus opens our eyes as a reward for our penance over the next forty days, we will see better the road to Calvary and how that road leads to the glory of Resurrection. Let this be our unceasing prayer, Lord, that I may see, until we come to look upon the face of our Savior, in the kingdom He has won for us, in the New Jerusalem.