

Second Sunday Of Lent

Dearly Beloved,

Today we mark the second Sunday of Lent. The program of this holy period is summed up well in the verse of Gradual: *Vide humilitatem meam et laborem meum, et dimitte omnia peccata mea* — Look upon my humility and my labor, and forgive all my sins. Leaning on the abundance of grace God gives us during this season, we work hard at fasting, prayer, and almsgiving that we may be forgiven, believing that the Lord sees our efforts and rewards us in His mercy. Lent is, then, an exercise of faith and works. We fast, but we do not fast as the world does, for the bodily benefits, but principally because we have faith that it atones for our sins. We do works of mercy not because it makes us feel good, but because we have faith that what we do to the little ones, we do to Christ.

Thus, the world does things that mimic the Church's observances during Lent, but without the theological virtue of faith driving them, they are not salvific. The centrality of faith is found in the epistle for today's Mass, where St. Paul tells us that we are not to be like the gentiles, who do not know God. We are not to be like them, he says, particularly in two ways: sexual excess and dishonesty in business. These actions, of course, violate the commandments. But St. Paul counsels against them not only for that reason, but because they manifest a vision of this life alone. Whether it is the person whose life choices revolve around the 'passion of desire' as Paul puts it, or the person whose life is characterized by lying and duplicity for the sake of making more profit, both behave as if there is no judgment at death, as if others are to be used for their gain, as if life has no value apart from pleasure, money, or power. Both ways of life betray despair and a subsequent grasping for whatever each can get, and these are characteristic of our society. Their actions say, this is the only life; those who believe in Christ and His resurrection are fools.

If we are called to not be as the gentiles, then, we are called to be people of faith. Faith tells us that purity of heart matters, that vows matter, that suffering has meaning, that honesty, even in trivial things, matters. Faith tells us that serving God now will lead to a reward in the life to come, that adhering to the will of God, even if it should at times grieve us, is more life-giving than doing our own will. Thus faith is work, and in the world as it is now, it is a lot of work. It is true labor to believe in the world to come when everyone around us lives as if neither judgment nor heaven exists. It is true labor when the world says we are weak or backward or naïve simply because we live for something we cannot see but that has been promised to us by Truth himself.

The challenge we face can be likened to what the Apostles faced: Peter, James and John had seen Christ transfigured on the mountain, they experienced, in a way, His divinity, and they heard the Father testify to the Son. But when they came down the mountain, they continued their journey to Jerusalem and to Calvary, and that journey ended in the rejection of their Master, not his exaltation. They knew what they had experienced on the mountain, but they had to continually recall it to mind so that their faith would not waver.

We also have experienced Christ's power; we have seen him radiate in our lives and in lives of others, particularly the Saints. We know our faith is true, but now we must work to recall it, over and over again; we must be humble enough to believe, awaiting the fulfillment of the promises made to us by our Savior. It is dark, but faith is a light to guide our steps.

In his second letter, St. Peter writes about the Transfiguration, saying that he did not preach fables, but he spoke of things he had actually seen and heard. He had seen the glory and honor of Jesus on the mount; he had heard the voice of Father tell him to listen to Christ, since He is His Son, His Image, His ambassador. But even though he had experienced these things and hands them on to us as a witness, he compares them to a light shining in a dark place. The light is faith; the dark place is this world. And we are to wait with patience until the light rises and is as bright as the morning star. St. Peter lived this: he guided the Church in a time of intense persecution, when, from a human point of view, it seemed that Nero was determined to destroy it completely.

But for the Christians who remained faithful, the light was not snuffed out, but grew into the intensity of noon-day when, upon their deaths as martyrs, they looked upon Light itself in the glory of heaven.

We are not yet living in a time of violent persecution, but we are living in a time of indifference to God and of disdain for faith and religion. It is fashionable to look down upon true, divine faith. As Elizabeth Goudge puts it, 'Unbelief is easier than belief, it is less demanding and even flattering, for the unbeliever feels himself to be intellectually superior to the believer.' And also, we could add, morally superior, for the things we suffer for righteousness' sake, have no meaning to such persons. The notion of making a sacrifice now, especially a lifelong sacrifice, makes sense only if eternal life is real, and something we gain or lose depending upon our fidelity or infidelity on this earth. As the same author says, 'Unbelief haunted by faith produces a pleasant nostalgia, while belief haunted by doubt involves real suffering.'

We know, however, that our task is not to convince the world of these things; it is rather, in union with St. Peter and the Saints who have proceeded us, to fix our eyes on the light shining in the darkness, and to be faithful to that light until all is light. Faith, as Dante says in his *Paradiso*, is "a spark, which then becomes a burning flame and like a heavenly star within me glimmers." Let us not be like the gentiles; let us believe in the divinity of the Lord Jesus and the fulfillment of His promises, and let us do so no matter how dark the world becomes. There will come a time, and has already begun, when the spark that is within us, will be like Prometheus' flame, sought by all who wish to truly live.

May the Lord strengthen us to persevere in faith with this Lent as our training ground. And may Peter, James and John assist us with their intercession until we reach that blessed place where "night shall be no more; we will need no light of lamp or the sun, for the Lord God will be our light, and we shall reign for ever and ever."