

First Sunday of Lent, Year B
Gen 9: 8-15
Ps 25:4-9
1Pet 3:18-22
Mk 1:12-15

Deacon Bob Cassey
St. Petronille Parish, Glen Ellyn
February 18, 2018

This is the first Sunday in Lent. Last Wednesday a great many of us let somebody smudge ashes on our foreheads, as a reminder that our presence in this world is only temporary and that something more – and greater – is in store for us.

The Church teaches that every human being is created with a mission and a destiny. In the words of the old catechism, we were made to know God, love God, and serve God in this world and to be happy with God forever in the next world. We are destined for glory, eternal happiness with God in heaven. In the meantime, as human creatures, we have work to do – to know, love, and serve God in this world. That's true of everybody.

Christians have the same destiny – eternal happiness with God in heaven – but we have a special mission, in addition to the mission to know, love, and serve God that we have as human beings. It's the mission to give witness to Jesus by our words and our lives.

The passage I just proclaimed from the Gospel according to St. Mark shows us the very beginning of Jesus's public ministry. The Gospel writers tell us that at the very end of his public ministry, just before he ascended into heaven, he gave his church what is commonly referred to as the Great Commission. In St. Matthew's Gospel the Great Commission consists of the command to teach all nations and to baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. St. Luke, as frequently happens among the four evangelists, tells a somewhat different story. St. Luke reports, in the first chapter of the Acts of Apostles, that Jesus told his apostles – and through the apostles he told us – that with the help of the Holy Spirit, we will be his witnesses "in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Jesus entrusted us with the mission of building up his church and witnessing, in every corner of the world we touch, to the good news that is the resurrected Lord Jesus. At the end of Mass the deacon sends us forth. "Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life." Go in peace and be Jesus's witnesses.

Today's Gospel gives us a thumbnail sketch of Jesus's teaching and preaching. "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel." What we have to do if, as human beings, we are going to know, love, and serve God in this world and if, as baptized Christians, we are going to be Jesus's witnesses – what we have to do is to repent and believe in the good news.

Christian life is a continuous call to repentance. Every virtuoso musician practices and practices and practices. Every champion athlete trains and trains and trains. That's why every year the Church gives us the season of Lent. Lent is a time-out period. The rest of the year our focus must be outward, on feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless and comforting the sorrowful and all the rest of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. In Lent, without neglecting the needs of those we minister to, the focus is turned inward. We ask, what is God asking me to do during the 40 days of Lent to make me a better follower of Jesus? What old habit can I break, or what new habit can I form, to make me a better witness to the good news that is Jesus?

Based on the passage from the Gospel of Matthew that is proclaimed on Ash Wednesday, the Church prescribes three penitential practices for our Lenten observance. They are prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. The fasting is normally expected to free up some time and save some money. The freed up time is supposed to be spent in prayer and the saved money belongs to the poor and should be given as alms.

Permit me to make some suggestions about the three penitential practices.

Almsgiving. Father Jim has been reminding us about the needs of the parish and the diocese and our obligation to support them with our time, talents, and treasure. As good and worthy as those causes are, supporting the parish and the diocese is not what almsgiving is about. Almsgiving is about helping the poor. Here's my suggestion. Every household in the parish receives a set of envelopes in the mail. For each month, there is a green envelope marked "Sharing Fund." Put your alms in the green envelope for February, March, and April, and drop that green envelope in the collection basket.

Prayer. We tend to think of prayer as us telling God what we're worried about and what we'd like to get from him. My suggestion? In your busy schedule, stake out a few minutes of quiet time and spend those minutes opening yourself up to the voice of God. Listen, just listen to what God has to say. Try that every day in Lent starting today.

Fasting. Fasting is about our relationship with the stuff we consume. Apart from the rules about fast and abstinence, I suggest that you examine the patterns of your own consumption. Maybe you can stop checking the balance on your retirement account for awhile. Maybe for you it's a matter of ignoring the number of "likes" you get and followers you have on social media. Think about it, and God will show you what to do.

In every case – almsgiving, prayer, and fasting – God in his mercy and love will show you the way. God will show you what in particular you need to do during this Lenten season to better know him and love him and serve him, to be his witness in every corner of the world you touch, and to go in peace glorifying him by your life.