

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

There is a story told of a meeting of the Devil with his top advisors. It was a single-item agenda, focused on how to get more people to sin. Given the surroundings, quite likely it was a “heated” discussion.

One of the junior members of the team, with eyes fixed on promotion, spoke up. “Basically”, he said “ we just need to convince people there is no such thing a sin. This is a concept invented by the so-called Holy Ones, to control people. If we set a good campaign in place, social media, TV Ads, Billboards and, most importantly gossip and word of mouth, we can lead people to a place where they believe there is no such thing as sin. Then, in the lifestyles they freely choose, they will play themselves into our hands and we will have them where we want them.”

Some agreed with his logic, though some felt he was young and lacked experience. In time though, the point was taking hold and became the favoured approach. Then the Devil spoke.

“That simply will not work. People are not foolish, and in their hearts, they know there is such a thing as sin. They see it all around them. Just look at the world today. We can see it everywhere. Injustice, wrong-doing, selfishness, people’s greed, murders, stealing – come on, we don’t need to name them – we all know them and so do they. Admittedly they convince themselves there is no sin in what is being done. No, your idea simply won’t work. In their hearts they know that they need to do better and to – though I hate using the word – repent”.

There was silence.

“So what do you suggest?”

“We will never convince them that there is no sin. Some of them, maybe, but not all of them. Neither will we convince them – all of them – that there is not a need to repent”.

“Is that it then?” asked the younger member of the team, “Do we just give up?”

“Not at all”, said the Devil “we just need to convince them there is no rush.” **(352 Words)**

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

If there is a specific word presenting itself to us in today’s readings, I think it is the word “promise”.

It is a wonderful word that gives hope and helps us to cope with difficult situations in life. If we can believe the promise will be fulfilled, we can work our way through moments not of our choosing and challenges that are difficult.

Broken promises are heart-breaking. Something as simple as a service provider saying he or she will call you back, but the call does not come or that a job will begin on a given day, but nobody turns up. This leads us to feel frustrated, left down and disappointed. At its worst, the broken promise leads to anger and maybe even some form of retaliation.

In Trócaire’s Lenten Campaign 2020, we are face to face with people who know the meaning of broken promises. Their set-backs are more serious and life threatening than a plumber turning up

on Wednesday evening rather than Monday morning. Their very lives and the lives of their families are at risk.

When Jesus takes Peter, James and John to the mountain top, they experience something wonderful and beyond expectation. They encounter the one they had known as friend in a way they had never seen before and he is truly revealed to them as the Son of the Father. Though they could not take it all in, they knew their lives could never be the same again. Transfixed as he was transfigured, they ask “Lord, can we build three tents?” It was as if they wanted to stay in this moment forever.

Gently, he points them towards ground level again. It is here they must live their lives, not forgetting what they had witnessed. It is here, at ground level, they must make a difference. They and all who followed them in his name and because of this moment, share in the fulfilment of the promise.

There are so many people at ground level, living under daily threat and in constant fear, looking to us today, seeking our help today that they too may know the promise kept. (356 Words)

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

“Is the Lord with us or not?”

A question born of frustration and fear of the unknown. In fairness, not a totally unreasonable question when people were deprived of the basics. It is a question however that our faith seeks to answer, and that answer must be, despite what might or might not be happening in our lives and world, “God is with us”.

He is easiest found in moments of decency. When one reaches out to another, in situations of need and despair, God is found, and thirsts are quenched.

Few stories capture this as well as the encounter with the woman at the well. Jesus, like Moses’ travelling companions, knew the ravages of thirst and sat beside a well. There he met a woman and asked for a drink. Initially she was reluctant and pointed out the differences between the two of them – he, a man and she, a woman; she, a Samaritan and the bad history that existed between her people and his and the practicalities of him not having what was needed to dip into the well and draw water. It was deadlock, stalemate and no progress would or could be made.

A conversation followed. A bit of banter between the two and it led to a place of respect. It is a conversation where judgements and assumptions are met with gentleness and respect; where the impossible becomes possible and where thirsts are quenched. For there was more than one thirsty person at that well. Water quenched the thirst of one while respect and acceptance satisfied the thirst of the other.

Maybe that’s where we are today. Is it possible we have some pre-conceived notions about people and their intentions? Might it be that we feel we have all the answers when we are not even sure of the questions? Is there a chance our attitudes might change if we truly engage with another in a conversation we could never imagine taking place?

The Lord is with us! Talk to one another, listen to one another, with open hearts. (343 words)

ST PATRICK'S DAY

Did you ever look at the satellite image of Ireland, as used in weather forecasts? Even, beside our nearest neighbour we look small. Certainly, we are on the edge. Sometimes though, it's not a bad place to be.

The "mustard" seed of today's gospel along with the little shamrock, might well be our symbol. Over the years, as a nation, we have punched above our weight in many areas of life, not least, in the promotion of the Gospel message. That same message St Patrick brought to us close on 1600 years ago. His word found its way into the mustard seed and, once planted in true Irish hearts, became a shrub rooted in faith, offering shelter and hope to countless men, women and children in practically every country of the world.

"Times have changed", many say. Even more say they have "Moved on" and there is no denying of either, but the mustard seed is still the mustard seed. We have what it takes to be a people of faith and a nation that makes a difference, not just to our own people but to the world.

Some say that, in the discussion around climate change, what Ireland does or does not do in terms of recognising the need for caution, will make no difference on a worldwide scale. This comes perhaps from the satellite image where we look so small and, on the edge, but again the mustard seed comes to mind. Though it may well challenge us, perhaps our real contribution to the global story, is example and a display of a willingness to recognise the truth of our situation.

It is similar with our faith. Maybe nationally we have lost something of our Christian identity. Sadly too, there are some who would wish to see its total demise and we might well wonder what is the point in making any effort around faith. We might be the only house on the street or I might be the only person in my house that has come to church on St Patrick's Day. What difference will that make to my street or my home? The difference lies in example. Maybe someone saw you come here today, maybe at home just now you are missed from the house because you have come here to pray. Never underestimate the value of the mustard seed.

Let us throw the shamrock a lifeline rather than drown it. (405 Words)

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

In these Lenten Days of 2020, we meet a man in the gospel with 20/20 vision!

He began the day in blindness but, having encountered Jesus, ended it able to see. His sight ran deeper than just seeing the people and things around him. For alongside his physical sight, his spiritual sight was also ignited. Having been questioned by people who could not accept Jesus, he came to realise that only a man who comes from God can give sight to the blind. When he pointed out this simple truth, he was put in his place by the experts: "Do you mean to teach us and you a sinner through and through?"

The manner of his healing is significant. It is messy – Jesus taking soil from the ground and spitting on it to make a paste that he rubs into the man's eyes. Little regard for health and safety there! Yet what needed to happen, happened. The man was gifted with the ability to see. Is there some deeper significance in this? Is there something about respect for the earth – that earth that receives

our mortal remains and from which, with Jesus, we strive to rise again. Is the spittle something to do with tears, waters flowing from Jesus' side? Maybe or maybe not but the fact remains that God uses the everyday things around us to work his miracles if only we have eyes to see.

Reminding ourselves again of Trócaire's Lenten Campaign, we are aware of families blinded and harassed by circumstances not of their making. Like the Gospel man today, the sins are not theirs or those of their parents, they are victims of injustice. Just as the Lord wished to open a new future for the blind man, so he does for those at the heart of the Lenten campaign. It may not be easy but there is surely a call going out to all who can help to do so in whatever way is possible. Perhaps the eyes that need opening today, are the eyes of the oppressors, that they may see clearly the harm they are inflicting on others. (355 Words)

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Quite frequently the gospel passage we hear today is read at Funeral Masses. It is not difficult to understand why since Jesus is consoling a family in grief. He goes a step further though and brings back to life the one who has died. Often, we wish we could do likewise but that script is not ours to write and that power rests in God's hand alone.

We remember Martha and Mary from another wonderful gospel story – the one where Jesus visited their home. Martha began to cook a meal for the Lord and Mary sat at his feet listening to him. In a short while, Martha became annoyed by this and asked Jesus to tell Mary to help him, but Jesus insisted Mary had chosen the better part and that Martha worried about too many things. The truth is though Jesus needed both. Martha's work in the kitchen was as central to his visit as Mary's reverence. They approached him in different ways but their friendship for and love of him was solid. That is why he is at their house today – they were his friends as was Lazarus who has died.

Once again, we find Martha in motion and Mary sitting in the house. Little, it seems has changed. Martha on the move, Mary pondering but both wanting Jesus to be there for them at this sad hour.

It is interesting that both of them say more or less the same words to Jesus: "If you had been here, my brother would not have died" – interesting because, though they have different approaches and personality types, they have each arrived at the same conclusion. They both know that Jesus is the only answer to their situation and that his presence is key.

Where are we today in this story? Are we rushing around the place with Martha or can we sit and reflect with Mary? Faith is at its very best when both types are interspersed. Both faith types are needed and whichever category we might fit into, be happy and at peace there. For in the fullness of faith, we will all arrive at that same point of recognition of the central place Jesus holds in our lives. (369 Words)

PALM SUNDAY

Last Advent a man spoke of being at Mass and the priest asking them to pick a card from a box. The card contained the name of characters associated with the Christmas story. The man discovered that he had pulled the card with the word "DONKEY" written on it and wondered if this were a sign!

It's strange that the donkey features at both ends of the life of Jesus – the Christmas donkey taking Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem and most likely further along their road. Today, bringing Jesus into Jerusalem. Consistent presence and travelling companion. Chances are it's no accident the donkey is found in both stories.

The purpose of the Advent exercise was that people might reflect on the character they had chosen and journey through the days to Christmas, wondering how their character felt and how he, she or it, prepared to take a unique place in the story of salvation.

Maybe today, we could focus on some of the characters in the Gospel passage we have just heard. Given the choice who would you want to be? Judas? Peter? Simon of Cyrene? Pilate? The servant girl? One of the jeering crowd? The soldier at the foot of the cross? The part of Jesus is taken – there is truly only one that can fulfil that role.

The reality is we have a part and we can all too easily be one of the less than savoury characters in this week's drama. Judas, who for a handful of coins betrayed Jesus. The one who gets lost, literally lost, in a mob and shouts for an innocent man's crucifixion. We might be Peter in denial of ever knowing Jesus. Maybe Pilate who thought that washing his hands was enough as he condemned an innocent man. Maybe we'd prefer to be Simon who at least could say he shared the weight of the cross or the soldier who came to recognise Jesus with the words: "In truth, this man was a son of God".

The reality of this Palm Sunday is we must make a choice. Stand with and for justice wherever it is trampled upon or wash our hands and yell with a thoughtless crowd. (366 Words)