Reflection:

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“This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed....” Isaiah 58

Fifth Week of Ordinary Time

On the Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time, we reflect on Luke’s Gospel's marvelous call of Peter. Jesus preaches from Peter’s boat, invites Peter out into “deeper water” and shows him his power to catch fish. When Peter recoils in fear, Jesus calls him to gather people with Jesus’ same power. “Do not be afraid,” Jesus tells him, and says that from now on he will be catching people instead of fish.

We have only three days of the Fifth Week of Ordinary Time. Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent.

The first few days of this week are the last of the Ordinary Time readings until May 16, the day after Pentecost Sunday, which ends the Easter Season.

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On Monday and Tuesday, Mark’s Gospel continues with stories of Jesus’ healing and of his challenging and being challenged by the religious authorities. “People immediately recognized him. They scurried about the surrounding country and began to bring in the sick on mats.” The Pharisees and scribes question Jesus asking, “Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders but instead eat a meal with unclean hands?” A frustrated Jesus responds, “You disregard God’s commandment but cling to human tradition.”

Beginning of Lent

The Season of Lent begins with four days that serve as an introduction to the four Lenten practices of Prayer, Fasting, Repentance and Almsgiving.

Ash Wednesday is a day of fasting and abstinence. We wear ashes on our foreheads to remember who we are and express our desire to turn away from sin and to believe the Good News. The Prophet Joel helps us begin our journey: “return to me with your whole heart.” “Rend your hearts, not your garments,” reminds us that this is an interior journey. The Responsorial Psalm, Psalm 51, has the antiphon: “Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.” Paul, in his First Letter to the Corinthians says, “be reconciled to God ... we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain ... Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus gives us a guide for our Lenten practices, “Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them.”

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On Thursday we read in Deuteronomy how Moses urges his people to turn away from sin. “Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the LORD, your God, heeding his voice, and holding fast to him.”

Friday and Saturday: It is the long tradition of Lent to prepare us for our journey by having us reflect on Isaiah, Chapter 58, as we begin. “This is the fasting that I wish” gives us the true picture of fasting: letting God’s Spirit transform us. It is a call to conversion. Jesus confirms his desire to help us, “I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners.”

On the First Sunday of Lent, as we begin our Lenten journey, we recall in the reading from the book of Deuteronomy how God was faithful to Israel, leading them out of Egypt to a land of “milk and honey.” Luke’s gospel gives us the temptation of Jesus when he was “led by the Spirit” into the desert. Jesus resists the devil. “You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.”
Daily Prayer This Week:

Prayer of the Church: Collect for 5th Week in Ordinary Time

We may feel like we never have enough; enough money, time, love, status or anything else that seems be the focus of our lives. We live lives that are packed with activities, meetings and obligations - keeping our hearts distracted away from our relationship with God, from our families and from others in our lives who need our love.

In these first four days of Lent, we can begin to prepare our hearts by asking ourselves how we want Lent to be different this year. What do we want to ask the Lord to give us - and more importantly, we can ask what the Lord wants for us this Lent. What gift of generosity, love or attention can we share with others in the weeks ahead? How can we focus on the Lenten season and ask that our hearts be opened to what is real - not to the externals which distract us so much? How will I be with my family and friends this Lent? What will I do that sets this season apart from my normal routines? How can I name, anticipate and feel the gifts the Lord showers on me with such love in the weeks ahead? And every morning, we can begin by sitting at the side of our beds with our hands open on our laps, asking God to help us receive these gifts with open hearts. We can carry that focus with us throughout the day, remembering in the quiet moments what we are asking for. Always, we end our day simply thanking God for the love and gifts of the day.

Praying Lent: First 4 Days

For these first four days of Lent, it will be a great help to set aside some time, even if it means getting up earlier each morning, to read about what Lent can mean and to let that soak into our hearts. The key is not to be somber or severe in any way, but to know that this is a time of great grace so that we can be attentive to it. The first thing to remember is that these 40 days are a gift to us. We are not trying to save ourselves by our Lenten practices. God has already saved us. We are only trying to let God get our attention and to give grace a chance to work in us. These days are critically important for choosing to establish some Lenten patterns. Depending upon our age or health, we will want to do some fasting and abstinence, in regard to food. But, each of us can choose what else we can fast and abstain from during Lent. What practices of mine get in the way of my being open to hearing God's Word and responding freely? That's what needs transforming. Giving up needing to be right, fasting from my impatience, totally abstaining from escapist fantasies will open our hearts to God's grace. None of that takes extra time. It just takes desire. Adding new acts of kindness, gratitude and love each day for family and friends will open our hearts to the greater acts of charity and generosity for the poor.

Finally, Lent is the perfect time to choose to grow in gratitude. Every night, before going to bed, let us be faithful to giving thanks to the Lord who has given us so many blessings and offers us new graces each and every day.

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