

2019 LENT ONE

I remember, in my teaching days, a Year 13 boy confronting me with an aggressive series of questions.

‘What’s the point of fasting?’ ‘How can not having sugar in our coffee during Lent be pleasing to God?’ ‘Does it give God pleasure to see us suffering?’

The boy’s questions were quite reasonable. Ultimately they led us to the key question: ‘How could Jesus’ suffering on the Cross be pleasing to God?’

In facing this we must emphasize, over and over, that God did not will the Crucifixion of His Beloved Son. An innocent Man- a Man of exemplary goodness- was cruelly tortured on the day we call ‘Good Friday’. He was left to die hanging on a Cross. It was cold blooded, callous murder. God could not have willed that.

Likewise we have to ask ourselves why it was that Jesus resolutely made His way to Jerusalem, knowing that His Crucifixion would be inevitable. Why did He not do a U-turn and return home to live out His life in peace as the Village Carpenter of Nazareth?

We have the beginnings of answers to these important questions in today’s Gospel.

At His Baptism, Jesus had been anointed as the Messiah. He was then led into the Desert by the Holy Spirit where for 40 days He prayed for enlightenment on what the call to be the Messiah entailed.

It was a time of intense inner tumult. Satan, the father of liars, was present; and tried his utmost to muddle Jesus in His thinking; striving to make Jesus totally ineffective in His role as the Messiah.

Satan’s first temptation was for Jesus to turn a stone into bread. Jesus had fasted for the 40 days and was hungry. Why shouldn’t He put His miracle-working powers to His own advantage and create some luscious bread to quell His hunger? Why shouldn’t He use the powers He had as a miracle worker to keep Himself fed and safe?

Jesus rejected this temptation. He saw clearly that His miracles were not to be for His own personal benefit; there had to be no thought of personal gain.

The second temptation was for Jesus to enlist the help of the powerful and rich of Israel and to be a Messiah they would support- a warrior king, who would expel the hated Romans from their land and force people of all nations- at the point of a sword- to accept Jesus as their Messiah.

Instead Jesus saw it to be the Father's Will for Him to be powerless in worldly terms, to live simply and to try to persuade people to accept the Gospel without any coercion. The Gospel was to be something people would need to embrace freely. There would be no bizarre miracles to gain instant popularity or power. Miracles would be low-key, normally worked in private and always motivated by compassion; never to entertain the crowds.

Jesus' death on the Cross was the result of His uncompromising preaching. The rich and the powerful felt their positions to be threatened by what He was saying. Jesus knew that to be faithful to His Mission He could not compromise what He knew to be the Truth. There could be no ducking for safety in times of danger.

The absolute love which inspired Jesus' faithful ministry and led Him to His death on the Cross had cosmic significance. The rank darkness which had overshadowed the world, separating humanity from God, since the time of Adam and Eve was obliterated by the radiance of Christ's wondrous obedience. It effected a new relationship- a New Covenant- between God and humanity enabling all people to be at peace in God's sublime presence.

And so...why should we fast during Lent? How should we face suffering?

In the same way as Christ did. In our fasting and in our suffering, we should unite ourselves with the sufferings of Christ on the Cross- and with the suffering of all the martyrs and righteous men and women of history- and offer our fasting and our sufferings as a gift of love to God, for the salvation of the world.

Fr. Frank Scott, when he was Chaplain at the Waikato Hospital had a practice which brings this theology to life.

Occasionally he would meet a gravely ill Catholic who was embittered with God and with the Church and was refusing the Sacraments. Father Frank would ask all the other patients he met during the day to offer their sufferings to God, in union with Christ suffering on the Cross, for the salvation of that very sad person. Fr. Frank told me that time after time miracles of grace resulted.

So let us offer our fasting and our sufferings- small as they may seem- in union with Christ's suffering on the Cross- for someone in special need of God's graces.

Our fasting thereby becomes redemptive. Far from having no point, as that Year 13 boy intimated, our fasting becomes a powerful force for very great good.