

“Lent, A Joyful Journey”

Homily of March 5, 2006

by Fr. Brian Joyce

Here we are at the beginning of Lent, the first Sunday of Lent, and our theme is “A Joyful Journey.” I don’t know about you, but when I hear that it’s Lent again, “joyful” and “joy” are not the first things that come to my mind. And, yet, that’s really what Lent is about. You’ll notice during Mass, we say a preface before the Eucharistic prayer, and the preface for Lent says this, “Each year you give us this joyful season when we prepare to celebrate the Paschal mystery with mind and heart renewed. You give us a spirit of loving reverence for you, our God, and of willing service to our neighbor.” And, above that prayer (You don’t hear it because the priest doesn’t read it.) there is a title. The title is “The Meaning of Lent.”

“Each year you give us this joyful season.” Yesterday, I celebrated the funeral of Steve Campagnoli who was a member of our parish, very active and involved for fifty years. Tuesday, I will celebrate the funeral for Sally Vas Dias, active and involved in our parish for forty-seven years. Two cheerful and joyful people, even with death. They faced death with cheerful acceptance and even with joy. Steve was usher for years at our five o’clock Mass, and among other things, he raised homing pigeons. I remember being amazed, ten years ago, when he told me he had a new batch and he drove up to Reno, set them loose, and they were home before he was. But it is interesting, a couple of weeks ago, in the hospital, he knew what was coming. He was not the least bit depressed. He was almost cheerful about it and he simply said, “It’s time to give the pigeons away.” He faced death joyfully. And Sally was diagnosed with lymphoma one week ago, and she spent most of that week cheerfully preparing her funeral. And her kids actually said to her, “We really should celebrate it now before you die because you are having so much fun doing this and we want you to be very much a part of it.”

And, yet, Lent still is a season of discipline. The key symbol of Lent, as of much of Christian life, is the cross. But we are into discipline, not because we are into suffering or sadness or sorrow, in fact just the opposite. Discipline is an uncomfortable word, and it’s an unavoidable word. It’s in the Scripture. It’s in every major religious tradition, and it’s very much part of life. It’s necessary for living rightly. Scott Peck in that best-selling book that he put out years ago, “The Road Less Traveled,” spends a whole chapter on discipline. And he describes it different ways. He says, “Discipline is the basic set of tools to solve life’s problems.” He says (I like this!)... He says, “Discipline is the technique of suffering properly.” You see, we are all going to suffer sometime. We might as well get it right. And he says, “Discipline is necessary to live successfully and to find joy.” That’s the goal, the goal of Lent, the goal of religion, the goal of Church, the goal of spirituality is to find joy. A great scientist and mystic of the last century said,

“Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God.” But we religious types, we churchgoers, we mess it up, I think, because at least we give a fouled-up impression to people. I remember a friend said to me once, “You know, you are never so holy as when you look just a little seasick.” We are supposed to look sad? Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher, agnostic, said “I can’t become a Christian until you sing happier songs.” And he looked at the congregation around him and he said, “You Christians sure don’t look redeemed.” Steve and Sally always looked redeemed, whether it was one month ago, Steve outside greeting people, handing them a bulletin and smiling at them, or just last week, Sally preparing her funeral.

What is it that is a healthy and holy form of discipline? It doesn’t get us looking just a little bit seasick. What’s it supposed to be? Well, I connect discipline with Lent and Lent for me are the memories of giving up candy as a child and giving up going to the movies. And it’s still kind of around, you know. It’s interesting, on Ash Wednesday they had a preacher (I don’t know who it was but it made the headlines.) preach on Lent in the Vatican. He suggested three things. He suggested people give up television during Lent, and (Are you ready for this one?) ... give up their cell phones during Lent. And then I think he knew he was in trouble, and so the third thing he said was “and give up criticizing people.” ‘Cause he knew he was in for a lot of criticism!

How do we find a healthy, holy approach to discipline? I suggest it’s by watching Jesus in today’s Gospel scene. I say “scene” because we don’t get the passage. Mark is writing today’s Gospel. Mark’s in a rush to get to the passion and resurrection, so he just says, “Jesus went out into the desert and spent forty days, came in preaching good news.” That’s all he tells us. But we know the story. We know that Jesus went out there and faced his own demons, and that Jesus was haunted by Satan. And we know three things that Jesus said “No” to because he was into healthy, holy discipline. He was tempted to turn stones into bread to do a miracle, to do magic, instant solution, instant cure, instant Messiah. And he said, “No, no, no. You have to wait. You have to work at it. You have to live life.” And, secondly, he was tempted to throw himself down off the roof of the temple, and let God take care of things. I don’t want to be the Messiah. Let God be responsible! He said, “No. I have to be responsible.” And finally, he was tempted to kneel down and worship Satan, the Father of Lies. And he said, “No. I’ll go for truth.” What Jesus does is that he tells us that we live in a culture that everything is instant. We get everything we want right away, or we want it right away, and we have to (The technical word for it is...) delay gratification. That’s the first tool for discipline. Put off, delay, gratification. We do it with our youngsters, our five year-old, we say “Wait and let somebody have their turn first ahead of you.” Our six year-old, we say, “Don’t take the first piece of cake. Let someone else share it.” As we get older, we are told, “Do your homework first, and then watch television. And then go to the mall.” But we have to learn to delay, just as Jesus said no, no instant Messiah, no instant miracle. Secondly, we have to accept responsibility. Didn’t we do this as children? As soon as we were caught in a fight with our brother or sister, we would say, “He started it.” And she says, “He started it.” But, we have to let go of the excuses, the blaming, the resentment and simply say, “I am responsible.” I’m responsible for my life. I’m responsible for who I am. I’m responsible for my destiny. And, finally, we have to seek truth. As Jesus says, “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

I'm going to make a suggestion for all of us during this Lent, just one thing to do. But we need to do it every day. We talk about ourselves as being a baptized people, part of the Jesus Movement, a noble people. I am going to suggest that each of us try, once a day, to deliberately do a noble act, to do something noble. It doesn't have to be big. Doesn't have to be sensational, but it has to be daily. It may be a phone call. It may be a compliment to someone. It may be a comment. It may be contributing to someone. It may be assisting someone. But if we do that, just one noble act deliberately every day, these are the things that happen. This is what we experience. First of all, we've got to think about it. We've got to sit down and reflect on it. This is very close to what we call prayer. Secondly, we have got to be deliberate about it and that means discipline. We have to be able to let go. Now, for instance, my noble act today might be on the freeway, not cutting somebody off which I always do. But this time, I am going to be deliberate about not doing it. I am going to let go and do a noble act. What else we experience is our own goodness. Isn't this what Jesus announces in today's gospel?

The kingdom of God is near. It's within you. Believe the good news, that you are truly, truly good. We will experience that. We will be responsible and we may actually experience a lot of joy. This Lent, may you find joy. May you experience the presence of God. Amen.=