

*A Breath of Life From the Wilderness - 0100 - 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time - 080203*

Today is the 4<sup>th</sup> and concluding Sunday in our 4-week series on **Discipleship** and **Stewardship**. From the time of Adam and Eve, the first human beings with an immortal soul, life on Earth has been troubled. We prefer our own opinions, ideas, desires, and will, and turn away from God's will and plan for us. The results are disastrous. We don't have the power to live in perfect truth and justice, peace and love. We get lost, hurt others, and hurt ourselves. We neglect what is essential and forget our meaning and purpose, and lose sight of our origin and destiny.

God is a loving Father and looks with compassion on our inability to live as his children on our own. He sent his Son to be with us and show us the way. This is the great joy of Christmas. We remembered at the beginning of Mass that the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple is the 40<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas. During this festival of light we rejoice in Jesus, Light of God sent into the world to dispel the darkness of sin and the shadows of fear and death. Jesus came to us "in the fullness of time."

As the events of life unfold, we often find ourselves wondering why God is waiting to act or to answer our prayers, and we don't fully understand that whenever God acts, it is always in the fullness of time. The Blessed Trinity do all things well. In God there is only fullness, and the Father's plan for us is also about fullness. Jesus says of Himself as the Good Shepherd, as recorded by John the Evangelist in John 10:10 "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly." John himself says of Jesus in John 1:16 "From his fullness we have all received; one gift after another...."

The Father first began blessing us with fullness in Adam and Eve, but they were tempted and preferred their own thoughts and opinions to God's plan; so they fell out of God's abundance, felt ashamed of themselves and afraid of God, having lost the closeness God had given them. God made these first human beings a promise to send one who would save their descendants from the Evil one, and renewed that promise, making it more specific each time, to Noah, Abraham, and Moses. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise of salvation.

We can easily sum up what the Lord is saying to us today in what we have heard from the Word of God in the readings today. It's as if God is saying to us, "I remember walking with Adam and Eve in the garden everyday. They really enjoyed walking with Me, and I enjoyed them too. Then they got distracted and turned away from me. I felt sorry for them, because they quickly became ashamed and afraid, and they didn't know how to come back to Me and in a way didn't want to come back, even though they now suffered from loneliness. So, here I am inviting you to walk with Me once again in the garden of life. When I make all those statements about happiness in the ups and downs of life, I simply mean that you don't have to be lonely anymore. Don't be afraid of the chaos of your confusing thoughts, turbulent feelings and emotions, of the conflicts in your psyche, or of the depths of your soul. You are not alone if you open yourself up to us, to Me Jesus and my Father and the Holy Spirit."

When you look at Jesus, do you not find the quality of his humanity attractive? Isn't the quality of his humanity attractive? Once our eyes are open to see the deep quality of Jesus' humanity, we find Him so attractive that we want to get closer to Him, we want to know Him more. We want to have what He has; we want to be what He is. This is what discipleship is: to want to know Jesus, to follow Him and learn from Him, to become more familiar with Him, and to become like Him.

We see Jesus carefree and generous with time. He tells us to join Him in keeping the Lord's Day holy. As we listen to the Word of God and worship the Blessed Trinity here every Sunday, Jesus shares with us his carefree heart; so we can enjoy our family and friends all day. In time, our freedom to enjoy time spreads into the rest of the week and brings order to the chaos of our struggles with time.

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We see Jesus kind and generous with talent. He invites us not to worry about our life or about the lives of others or those we love. As we learn from Jesus to trust in our Father's plan for us, He sets our hearts free to use our talent to bless others and also to help the Trinity in their work of putting truth, goodness, and beauty in the world and developing order out of chaos.

We see Jesus not holding onto money, land, or possessions except the clothes He wears. We are attracted by the great freedom Jesus has to trust in his Father and to accept to receive from others who freely share what they have with Him just as He freely gives of himself to everyone. Jesus offers to renew our way of looking at money, land, and property and our financial responsibilities.

We look at money, land and property with the eyes of the world. Have you ever heard anyone in business, trades or professions, government, or the worldwide culture factor into the equation such things as the gift of life we receive freely from God? We receive our very breath from one moment to another from God and have no control over it. All our personal circumstances and opportunities are gifts that are not enjoyed equally, but they are still gifts to us. (Demonstrate holding up chasuble, glasses, wallet, etc.) When I say, "This is mine... mine... mine", that is not entirely true. I have no power at all to keep money, land or possessions or even my own body beyond the death of the body.

The truth Jesus says to set us free is really shocking: all life, all that exists really belongs to God because He is the Creator and originator of all things. This is why the world refuses to acknowledge God as Creator; it refuses to relinquish control over money, land and property. The minute when we acknowledge that all things belong to God; then it immediately becomes clear that all good things are put on the Earth for the equal enjoyment of all. In fact, all good things are not equally enjoyed by all.

How do we enter into Jesus' own freedom and continue to live out our life and fulfill our obligations but with freedom and childlike peace and joy? It is as it also is for time and talent. The Father calls us to give back to Him a portion of our treasure for his glory, for his work in the world, and to help others come closer to the equal enjoyment of all good things. God gave his Chosen People the Torah, the Law, providing them with detailed instructions for bringing in and offering to God the first fruits of their fields, vineyards, orchards, and livestock, taking care to leave some for those who are poor or alone. At one point He asked his people to bring Him the tithe or tenth of all their revenue.

Practically speaking, how do we move closer to the Father's plan for our lives with regards to money, land and possessions? The first step is to look at our current practices, what we actually do. This means sitting down with paper and pencil and taking an inventory of all that we have and earn, of what we spend and for what purposes, and how much we give back to God for his work here at St. Luke, and how much we give for the poor and to help others through various charities and personally as when we give to a beggar on the street. Then you take what you give to God for his Church and to the poor and needy and compare it to other things and in particular to your overall earnings.

I first did this in 1992. I had heard about these things for some time but never actually did anything about it until finally I got fed up of all my preoccupations around money and possessions. But I'm warning you: the first time we do this, we are usually in for a shock. Until then I thought that I was generous. I was shocked to discover that all that I gave to God for his work in the church and all that I gave to help the poor and suffering through various charities and what I gave spontaneously to beggars on the street or to help others and never get it back didn't add up to a very big percentage of my revenue. I really thought it would be more than it actually was. Nevertheless, it's still a very good thing to take this inventory of our actual current practices, because it is the truth that sets us free.

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Our offerings to God and to the poor might add up to 5% in all, or more if we are generous, but more often than not it will add up to more like 1/10<sup>th</sup> of 1%. That's pretty far from a tithe. So what does the Lord ask of us? He asks us to take a step. If you are bold and daring you might jump immediately to 10%, or you may prefer to be cautious and go easier and go, for example, from ½ of 1% to 1%, or from 1% to 3%, and so on. The thing to keep in mind is that this is between you and God, or between you and your spouse and God, or between you and your family and God. Jesus is making us an offer we can refuse, but we'll never get a better one. Jesus is offering each of us to become our business partner. He is the best there is.

This week we enter into the season of Lent. Lent is a great gift from our Father – a period of 40 days during which we can freely choose to walk with Jesus into the deserts of our lives. As we accept to walk with Jesus by taking on various Lenten practices and reflect on the Word of God from the daily Mass, like Jesus we encounter wild beasts. They are our faults and sins. Jesus invites us to accept to look them in the eye, to admit them, confess them, and turn away from them. Jesus shows us how to resist temptation and our faults and imperfections by finding strength and guidance in the Word of God. Every Saturday in Lent I'll be in the confessional between 4:00 p.m. and Mass time. This will be another opportunity for you to meet Jesus personally like the people we see in the Gospels.

If you haven't been coming for Sunday Mass every week, try to do so during Lent. You can also join us this week to receive ashes on Ash Wednesday as a sign of the Lent spiritual exercises you are willing to do and offer as a gift to the Lord. You will find a sheet with a variety of traditional and innovative Lenten practices in the bulletin today, and there are extra copies at the doors. You will also be offered in just a few weeks two Lent retreats or missions, one in French and the other in English. Great care is being taken in their preparation; there will be a prayerful atmosphere and even moments of adoration, a few social gatherings, and even activity for children. It will be a blessing for you and your family to come and participate in them or at least on the days that you can.

This is an opportunity for all of us to evangelize, to spread the Good News. Jesus is attractive but because He is out of sight in our culture and therefore out of mind, other people who aren't coming to church won't know what a great opportunity these Lent missions will be to meet Jesus and get closer to Him. The Lord sends you out today to share this good news with people you know. They will be so grateful to you if they come even once. After the Ushers have finished taking up your offerings to the Lord today, they will return to distribute colourful flyers giving the details of what will be happening at both Lent missions. Take a few flyers to bring to neighbours, work colleagues, fellow students, friends or relatives in order to personally invite them. Both you and they will be glad you did.

So, keep in mind that the least effort you make to be a more enthusiastic disciple to follow Jesus, or to be a better steward of the time, talent, and treasure God the Father entrusts to you, or to walk with Jesus through these 40 days of Lent, the Blessed Trinity will be with you and greatly reward you. It will also be kind and considerate for us to carry each other in prayer as we pour out our mind and heart to the Father through Jesus. May the Holy Spirit fill you anew and bless you and your family, and give us the joy of using us to bring many more people to enjoy the Father's love in Jesus.