

Homily for The Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C

(14/02/10)

Today's gospel contains the familiar text of the beatitudes, the Lord's summary of where true blessedness is to be found. In fact, we are rather more familiar with the version that is given in St Matthew's gospel where the list of beatitudes is longer, and there is no corresponding list of negative statements. In the version we have heard today, what is actually being presented by Christ is a contrast. There is one way of living that leads to happiness, and there is another that leads to misery. He makes the point very clearly that those who speak the truth will find they have many enemies, whereas those who are happy to abandon the truth will have no shortage of friends. The prophet Jeremiah also presents people with a choice in the first reading, saying that those who make God's truth their guiding principle will find that it brings with it a serenity and fruitfulness, whereas those who prefer to make up their own version of reality will be so damaged by this that they will no longer even be able to recognise goodness when they see it. All of us are faced with the same choice. Will we see the world as it really is, a world full of difficult but rewarding choices, or will we see instead a sort of fantasy world that allows us to do exactly as we please.

As Moses' life drew towards its end, he addressed the people of Israel who had been wandering in the desert for so long. He, too, put before them exactly the same choice. "Today I am offering you life and prosperity, death and disaster...I am offering you life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life, then, so that you and your descendents may live in the love of the Lord your God." (Dt 30. 15,19). For the people of Israel this was a defining moment, a vital choice had to be made: to follow the truth and live life as it was meant to be lived - choosing life; or to abandon reality, to live for the pleasures of the moment that can bring momentary pleasure on the surface of life, but which corrode and corrupt the heart - choosing death. The people chose life, although for the rest of their history, and ever since then too, they would hesitate from time to time, and wander along the path that leads to death.

Human life is full of moments where definitive choices have to be made. We are faced with decisions which we realise will somehow shape our future. It is very easy

to persuade ourselves that somehow these decisions are not as important as that, to fool ourselves into believing that I can indeed have my cake and eat it. The readings at today's mass are intended to puncture that self-deception. I cannot choose to do something that is radically wrong, however alluring it may be, and still be full of life. We must be prepared to make serious decisions about what we do, and be prepared to take the consequences of them.

All of this is leading me neatly on to preparing for Lent, which begins in just a few days time. We have a decision placed before us today. Will we use this time wisely, taking advantage of the opportunities that it offers us for growth, for renewal, for a fresh commitment, for an examination of our life and its direction that gives us a chance to re-connect with the priorities that so easily fall by the wayside, or will we let it all pass us by. If we are wise we will face this decision before Wednesday, and make some sort of choice about how we can use this time for renewal. Every year I turn again to these wonderful words of St. Josemaria, words which ask us what we plan to do:

"I have decided not to let this Lent go by like rain on stones, leaving no trace. I will let it soak into me, changing me. I will be converted, I will turn again to the Lord and love him as he wants to be loved."

So, what are we going to do? In the Opening Prayer at the start of mass we asked God to help us live in his presence, and that is certainly a good way of seeing Lent, a chance to strengthen our sense of living in God's presence. The three traditional tools that are set before us for Lent are prayer, fasting and almsgiving. If we really want to renew our lives, we must be prepared to embrace each one of these three.

I sometimes think that we Catholics have lost our way over prayer. We know we ought to do it, but we are not really sure what we ought to do. We might watch Muslims kneeling for prayer again and again through the day and almost envy them, because they seem to know what they ought to do, while we are not so sure. Here are some suggestions. Don't try and do anything too difficult, it is better to do something simple and achievable than to promise the earth and give up disillusioned. Perhaps spend a few moments in the morning or the evening (or both) with God. Perhaps use one of the day-by-day booklets for Lent, or use the wonderful monthly Magnificat

booklets, or use the day's mass readings. In the morning offer the day and all its plans to God, and at the end of the day thank him for all that has gone well, and ask forgiveness for the days bad choices and failures. Say the angelus together, perhaps as a family. Say grace before eating. Come to mass more often during the week. Go to confession. Don't be afraid of using set prayers, the prayers used by our ancestors for many years. Say the rosary - even saying a decade of the rosary is better than nothing at all, and recalls you into God's presence.

Then there is fasting. There was a time when it was fashionable for people to say they would take up some virtuous act instead of giving something up for Lent. This is dangerous territory. Of course, if there is something virtuous and good that you think you should be doing, by all means take it up, but this is not a substitute for fasting. Fasting is important in its own right. It is good for us to make a deliberate choice not just to give up sinful pleasures, but also to give up some measure of legitimate pleasures. The pleasures which may be perfectly good and innocent in themselves can be a kind of bait in the world's trap (See Scott Hahn 'Lord Have Mercy 128-9). As we become more and more attached to worldly goods, we turn further away from God. When I look at my glass of wine and want it, purely for its own sake and the pleasure it will give me it is time to withdraw for a while, so that I can once again see that this is a good thing which shows me how great and good is the one who created it. Fasting is our weapon against becoming dependent on the physical things of this world.

Finally there is almsgiving, which is another way of helping me to realise how much I have come to worship the false Gods of comfort and possession. Almsgiving challenges me to see God in every human face, to recognise each person as my brother or my sister, and to see just how dangerous possessions can become if we allow them to be a barrier between us and other people. The money I withhold prevents someone, somewhere from becoming more fully alive, but it also stops me from becoming fully alive. We need to listen again to Moses' challenge:

"I am offering you life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life."