

PREPARATION FOR LENT AND EASTER

A clean heart create for me O God. (Psalm 51)

In the Gospel Readings during Lent we hear Jesus' call to reform our lives, to change and come back to Him or to come closer to Him. The season of Lent is a time of 40 days to die to our selfishness so that there will be more room in our hearts for our Savior. We think of the elect (those not baptized) and the candidates (those already baptized) in the RCIA process of our parishes throughout the diocese as they are in the final period in preparation to receive the Sacraments. However, this time of purification and enlightenment is for every Christian as each person needs cleansing and healing up until we reach our final destiny in Heaven.

Let us look at the major themes of Lent and what they mean in our life

The Mystery of Sin

Jesus came out of the desert after fasting and praying for forty days and said "reform your lives for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4: 17). Jesus continues to speak to us through the Scriptures and so it is worth pondering the meaning of His words. Jesus knows that each person has attitudes that are sinful and which need to be purified. These attitudes are the root causes of sin. It is necessary for us to acknowledge *the reality of sin*. When we sin, we distance ourselves from God Who is perfect, self-giving love. Love and sin are opposites. Slavery is trying to find joy and happiness in something that does not yield joy and happiness. We become accustomed to the darkness and do not even realize we are in this slavery. In our own personal lives, we know that there is a *real struggle between good and evil*. In desiring peace and joy, we need to be continually exposed to the light of Christ to help us in the struggle to overcome the darkness of Satan and sin.

The Power of Darkness

There is a realm of light and a realm of darkness. According to the Book of Deuteronomy 30:15-19, Moses told the people there are definitely two ways and they (and we) must choose:

Here, then I have today set before you life and prosperity, death and doom. If you obey the commandments of the Lord, your God, which I enjoin on you today, loving Him and walking in His ways, and keeping His commandments, you will live. . . If however, you turn away your hearts and will not listen, but are led astray and adore and serve other gods, I tell you now that you will certainly perish. . . . I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life!

The two ways lead to the two Kingdoms in the world: The Kingdom of God (Christ) or the kingdom of Satan. However, these two Kingdoms are not equal. **The Kingdom of Jesus** is a Kingdom of Truth. The foundation of this Kingdom is to love God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbor as ourselves. In addition forgiveness is an essential. Jesus died on the cross so that our sins can be forgiven. We in turn are called to forgive others. The prayer that Jesus gave us, the Our Father, tells us that God will forgive us as we forgive others.

The kingdom of Satan is a kingdom of darkness and lies. In John 8: 43-47, Jesus says that Satan "was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in truth, because there is no truth in him. . . He is a liar and the father of lies." The good news is that Satan's kingdom has already been defeated by Jesus' death on the cross. However, he still tempts us to evil and sin through his lies because his greatest desire is to destroy us.

Purification of Heart and Mind

We need to be prayerfully seeking the Holy Spirit so that He will lead us in purification which is a process of grace working within us. Actual grace comes from prayer and making acts of kindness. We receive sanctifying grace, which is a participation in God's own Divine Life, in the Sacraments. This process of change, which is called conversion, requires our cooperation and it requires a change of heart. Conversion involves the whole interior life of the person. We pray and ask God for a new heart; "Create in me a clean heart" (attitude). We repent of sinful attitudes and behavior and God gives us the strength and power to change our sinful habits. So the process of daily conversion involves God supplying the grace, which is power – supernatural strength – and our responding to this grace through our cooperation. A daily examination of conscience is helpful for this.

Purification from sinful attitudes leads to freedom for a deeper relationship with Christ. We can then grow in our friendship with Jesus through quietly meditating upon His words and actions in the Scriptures

The incredible Sacrament of Baptism

The elect need to be prepared for the Sacrament of Baptism, the greatest day of a person's life. This Sacrament is not something that we do, but is a pure gift from God, causing transformation in us. We go down into the waters of Baptism and are "buried with Christ by Baptism into death" (Romans 6:4) – death to selfishness and sin – and then rise up – are reborn – by following Christ in His new life. We become adopted children of God as Baptism transforms our nature through participation in the Divine Nature by God dwelling in our souls. As a new creation (2 Cor 5:17) a baptized person is set aside for a sacred purpose, that of worship of God. As the elect grow in the understanding of their truest identity as children of God, rather than an identity being based on external things such as success, performance, how we look etc., they will experience interior joy and peace in living out this new, fundamental orientation.

Those preparing for Baptism will want to spend these weeks of Lent in a spirit of repentance with an intention to rid their life of any serious sin, selfish attitudes and patterns that harm personal relationships. The priest can help them look at ways they can avoid the occasion of sinful habits. The elect will want to approach Baptism with a desire to grow closer to Jesus Christ.

For the candidates who have already been baptized as well as all Catholics, Lent is a time to reflect on our own Baptism, growing stronger in living out this identity as a child of God by passing through self-conversion, growing in prayer, cooperating with God's grace and conforming more closely to Christ.

Healing in the Sacrament of Reconciliation

This Sacrament is called a second Baptism because our personal sins after Baptism are taken away. We are forgiven by God if we come to Him with true sorrow and a firm purpose to not commit these sins again. We might fail again, but we have to make up our mind to try not to commit these sins again and work on avoiding the times and places where these sins occur. Jesus showers us with sanctifying grace in the Sacrament of Confession. This grace gives us the power and strength to avoid temptations and to come away from sinful habits.

Conclusion

This season of Purification and Enlightenment is a beneficial season of grace for those who choose to be receptive to God's love. Each Lenten season we strive to die a little more to our personal selfishness and sinful attitudes in order to rise to new life in Christ on Easter morning. Thank You, Jesus for the gift of the Christian Life !