

RECTOR'S CORNER

Lent is about the renewal of love. That is the message of the Collect, Epistle and Gospel for today (Quinquagesima, BCP, p. 136), and it could hardly be clearer. The Epistle is the famous 'Love Chapter' from first Corinthians, which concludes, 'And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three: but the greatest of these is charity.' The Collect reminds us that 'all our doings without charity are nothing worth' and has us pray that God would send his Holy Spirit to pour into our hearts 'that most excellent gift of charity, the very [i.e., 'true'] bond of peace and of all virtues. It goes on to make clear that there is no true life without charity, for without it 'whosoever liveth is counted dead' before God. In the Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, 'Behold, we go up to Jerusalem'. They do not know why they are going, but He does. They are going to see the divine charity - the love of God - in Him as He gives up His life for the life of the world, that we may have life, and have it more abundantly (St John 10:10). And, just in case we do not get the point, Jesus heals a man born blind, who begs him to restore his sight. There is Lent in a nutshell. We are learning to desire with great longing that God would open our eyes to the divine charity. We are seeking love undistracted and free. This is the meaning of Lent and of the spiritual disciplines of Lent: fasting, prayer, the attentive and meditative reading of holy Scripture, and 'almsgiving' - giving of ourselves, our time, our money, our gifts, and our attention to God and to our neighbour. As God gives us the desire for an undistracted love, and our spiritual sight is restored to us, our lives are lifted up into the life of the true and living God, who IS Love (1 John 4:8): the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

How will love be renewed? By turning. By repentance. So we pray on Ash Wednesday, 'Turn thou us, O good Lord, and so shall we be turned.' (BCP, p. 613) The word 'repentance' easily becomes something gloomy and hateful to us, but this is either because we misunderstand it or we refuse to enter into it. St John Climacus, a great sixth-century spiritual teacher and man of prayer, speaks from deep within his own experience of God and of the life of repentance when he says, 'Repentance is the daughter of hope and renunciation of despair.' The way of repentance, which is the way of the Cross, appears to be the way of death. And it does require of us a kind of death to ourselves and our self-will, in order that we might embrace by obedience the way to life. But can we trust the voice of Christ, who commands us to walk in this way, and assures us that it is the way to true life? Well, all around us are things that promise us life in every way except repentance. They promise life, but they deliver death - the death of love, the death of friendship, the death of communion and fellowship and true community. Why ought we not to trust One who has shown so great love for us, and Who has gone where He would have us to follow?

This Lent, will we dare to hope that we may see the face of God? See it here in faith, hope, and charity, looking upon the face of the crucified Christ? And see it in eternity, when God will have restored to us our spiritual sight, and our taste for spiritual joy, that we rejoice in Him in the company of all His holy ones forever?

This morning, we welcome our Bishop. Notice the procession when he enters and leaves the Church. It is filled with meaning. He carries a shepherd's staff and guides us as we go so that we all together follow the Cross, that is, we follow Christ in the way of the cross. This morning we also gather to witness as three of our congregation receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit for the living of an adult Christian life, and make their public profession of faith and obedience to Christ. All the powers of an adult human being are gathered together like the branches of a dying plant to be pruned, lifted up, directed toward the Sun of Righteousness, which alone can give them life

and bring them to fruition. Let us pray for our Bishop now and day by day, for he bears a heavy responsibility for many people and parishes in a world that is largely indifferent or hostile to the way of repentance. And let us pray for Mary Louise, Emilie, and Shannon as, strengthened by the Spirit of God, they set their feet upon this way.

This morning we also welcome students from King's College and Dalhousie University in Halifax. In the words of their chaplain, Fr Gary Thorne, they are here

1. To witness how a parish attempts to live out its mission in an older urban core.
2. To come to a better understanding of poverty and isolation in a specific urban community.
3. To participate in the prayer of an inner city parish.
4. To appreciate the struggles of 'being community' and to encourage parishioners of Trinity Parish.

In a word, they are here to explore a life that is 'downwardly mobile' - moving deeper into the humility of God in Christ. And their question and ours this Lent must be whether or not this is, indeed, 'Vita Vitalis', to borrow the motto of Saint John High School: 'a life fully alive'.

On the table in the hallway are three items that may be of use in our spiritual quest this Lent. One is a meditation on fasting by the Rev'd Chris VanBuskirk. Fasting is a spiritual discipline that seems very strange and foreign indeed to us as modern people. It is just possible, however, that we have missed something by turning away from a discipline that has everywhere and always been a part of religious life in many different traditions and religions over thousands of years - and that was certainly part of the life of our Lord, his Apostles, and the Church through the centuries, and certainly belongs to our Anglican tradition. Then there is a 'Chinese Menu' Lenten rule, with practical and specific ideas for ways in which we can embrace the great spiritual disciplines of Lent in our lives. Finally, there is a little pamphlet by an anonymous priest of the Diocese of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island called, simply 'Private Confession - A Handbook for Anglican Laity'. This may be even more strange to us than fasting, but it is commended to us in the Prayer Book (BCP, p. 91), and the Prayer Book provides a form for making our confession privately to a priest (BCP, p. 581) as has every Prayer Book since 1549. In our Church no one is compelled to make use of this great wellspring of spiritual joy, for no one can be compelled to enter more deeply into friendship with God or with anyone else. But the invitation can be extended, and our Church has constantly extended it over many centuries.

The author of this pamphlet places before us the reason and the joy of repentance clearly and simply. In so doing, he also places before us the reason for the season of Lent, and its promise.

The confession of sins and the giving of absolution is for the forgiveness of sins and the renewing of a right relationship with God in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. That saving relationship, which was given to us at Holy Baptism and is strengthened by the regular receiving of Holy Communion, is regularly weakened and severed by sin. Our sin causes the heart of God to yearn for us to experience his forgiveness and Love anew. God has ordained the rite of private confession as the means for many to experience this grace in a thoroughly personal and intimate manner. The private confession of sins leads to the full assurance of God's absolute

There it is - what Lent is all about. It is about God, yearning that we may experience His forgiveness and Love anew. It is about God turning us in repentance toward His Goodness, that He may make us capable of happiness by causing us to rejoice in Him. It is about our hearts lifted up, hoping, aspiring, reaching out to receive all that is in the heart of God to shower upon us of His mercy and lovingkindness.