

Lenten Reflections

A Bible Study for Faith Sharing Groups

Using readings from Liturgical Year Cycle B

by Terry A . Modica



1st Sunday of Lent

Read:

Genesis 9:8-15

Ps 25:4-9

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:12-15

Reflect:

This Sunday's Gospel reading shows us the first thing that Jesus did after his baptismal anointing in the Jordan River: He wrestled with temptation.

His baptism had marked the moment of his complete surrender to the Father's will. As he arose from the water, he left behind his old life and began a new life of ministry.

The Father responded by telling him that he was very pleased, and the Holy Spirit filled his humanness. Jesus as God already had the Holy Spirit (one-hundred percent, he and the Spirit were the same God), but Jesus the Son, who was also fully human, now came fully alive in the Spirit. We can imagine how this experience in the Jordan River gave him the feeling of an elated spiritual high. And the next thing that happens is an attack of the devil.

The same pattern repeats itself in our lives. As soon as we experience new growth in our faith, or a new purpose for our faith, we run smack into a situation that tests the strength of our faith. However, if this didn't happen, how would we know that our faith is strong enough for our daily needs? How would we find out that we've spiritually matured? How would we know that we are ready to make a significant difference for the kingdom of God?

Sometimes without consciously thinking it, we decide that if we're going to be tested and we might lose, wouldn't it be better not to start something new? Well, that's another temptation!

Lent is the perfect time to examine the temptations that we face every day and turn them into new growth that will strengthen our faith.



Every time we face a sin and seek God's forgiveness, we become stronger. And if we take it a step farther by walking into the confessional with it, we also receive powerful graces directly from Jesus, through the priest, that will render temptations much more powerless.

And this makes us more useful to God in the mission of conquering evil in the world and helping his kingdom spread into the lives of the people around us.

Think of temptations as blessings in disguise: Use them as opportunities to purify your life, become more like Jesus, and grow powerful in the faith.

Questions for Personal Reflection:

† How well do you recognize temptation? How quickly do you rely on the faith that God has given you to say no to the devil's tricks?

† What temptation are you saying yes to right now? Are you willing to give it up as your Lenten sacrifice?

Questions for Faith Sharing:

† Describe a time when you experienced a spiritual high and then faced a strong temptation. How did you handle it?

† What role did (or will) Jesus play in overcoming this temptation?

Comments/Prayer Requests:

4th Sunday of Lent

Read:

2 Chronicles 36:14-16,19-23

Ps 137:1-6

Ephesians 2:4-10

John 3:14-21



Reflect:

Why do we hide in darkness? Why do we prefer to conceal our sins rather than face them and go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation and speak about them out loud?

It's Jesus who meets us in the confessional, appearing to us in the form of a priest who's sworn to secrecy. In the Gospel reading, Jesus assures us that he did not come to condemn us. It is safe to come into the light where our sins are exposed.

However, we don't like going to Confession when guilt is driving us deeper into the darkness of low self-esteem, the fear of being unlovable, or an inability to forgive ourselves.

Guilt is a good motivator for repentance, and regret motivates us to change, but low self-esteem triggers shame, which says that we are undeserving of forgiveness. Shame makes us even more afraid to face the truth about our sins.

However, God's image of you is not poor: He sees what is wonderful about you. He says you do deserve forgiveness. He wants to replace shame with joy.

What keeps you from repenting? Perhaps you would benefit from a therapist or spiritual director who helps you heal from low self-esteem. Whatever opportunity will help you get into the confessional, this is where your healing begins.

Jesus completes the healing by curing your spirit with forgiveness, mercy, and unconditional love through the words of absolution that he speaks to you through the priest.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus points out that whoever lives the truth (whoever is honest about themselves) "comes to the light" to be rescued. When we admit our sins, speaking it out loud to the ears of one of Christ's servants, we are rescued by Jesus. We hear Jesus minister to us through the vocal chords of the priest, and we receive from Jesus the power to resist the same sins in the future.

Why suffer any longer, hiding in the darkness of fear and a poor self-image? Jesus has come to rescue you!

Questions for Personal Reflection:

† What do you feel ashamed about? Have you taken this to the Sacrament of Reconciliation? If yes, remember that since God has forgiven you and the Church has forgiven you, they do not condemn you, so stop condemning yourself! If not, what are you waiting for? Blessings and healing await you!

Questions for Faith Sharing:

† Why does admitting our sins and receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation set us free to live in joy and peace?

† How have you experienced special graces from going to Confession?

† Describe a time when you lived in darkness; how did Jesus bring you into the light?

Comments/Prayer Requests:

Passion (Palm) Sunday

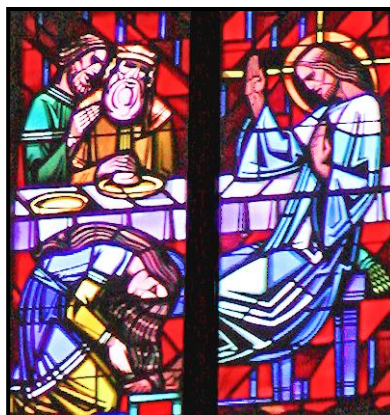
Read:

Isaiah 50:4-7

Ps 22:8-9,17-20,23-24

Philippians 2:6-11

Mark 14:1--15:47



Think about what he poured out for you so freely and generously. And again, ask yourself: "What's so precious that it's hard to let go of -- something that Jesus would appreciate receiving?" And then give it to him before the week ends; he will give you a new victory on Easter.

Reflect:

For Palm Sunday, before we get caught up in the Passion of the Cross -- the hardships and sufferings and death of Jesus that he endured because of his tremendous love for us -- let's take a look at the passion of the woman who anointed Jesus with perfume.

In those days, there were no deodorants and indoor plumbing for taking showers to get rid of body odors caused by the hot, sweaty climate. So people made perfumes. After creating a mixture of oils and herbs, they let it sit in a jar to ferment. The longer they stored it, the more potent--and valuable--it became.

For the perfume to be a "costly" gift for Jesus, it must have been fermenting for a very long time.

When we want to give someone a gift, we usually head to the store to buy something new. Right? But our most precious possessions are those that have been important to us for many years. Giving them to others feels like a very huge sacrifice.

What do you hold onto because it means so much to you? What has been fermenting in value because you've had it for such a long time? Can you imagine giving it away? Most of us couldn't do it unless we feel very passionate about the person to whom we give it. The giving has to be more valuable than the keeping. This happens only because of love.

How passionate do you feel about Jesus? What's so precious to you that it's hard to let go of -- something that he'd appreciate receiving from you? Are you willing to sacrifice this because of the love you feel for him? Do you feel *that* much love for him?

In other words, what's in your alabaster jar? Are you ready to pour it out to Jesus, freely and generously?

Questions for Personal Reflection:

† Prayerfully imagine yourself sitting at the feet of Jesus. Knowing what Holy Week is all about and the sacrifice he made for you on the Cross, how do you feel about him?

† What gift can you give him as a thank-you? Nothing seems good enough, but what's so precious that anointing Jesus with it will be a gift of sacrificial love?

Questions for Faith Sharing:

† What's in your alabaster jar? What talents or treasures or wisdom have you stored up, saved, protected, and developed, or what have you put on a shelf and forgotten about?

† As we prepare for Good Friday, come up with ideas on how to offer these saved-up gifts to Jesus. Why are these gifts like perfume to Jesus?

Comments/Prayer Requests:

Holy Thursday

Read:

Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14

Ps 116:12-13, 15-18

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-15



Reflect:

Why did Jesus wash the feet of his disciples? Not because they were too lazy to handle their own hygiene and as their servant he wanted to make life easy for them! Rather, he gave them (and us) a model to imitate.

Naturally, we want Jesus to make our lives easier. Isn't that the purpose behind many of our prayers? Well, surprise! We do get what we ask for, but not the way we had imagined. When we imitate Jesus, it's the way we cope with the difficulties of life that becomes easier.

Have you washed anyone's feet lately? Maybe you haven't literally soaped up a friend's smelly feet as a sign of your unconditional love, but I'm sure you have given of yourself in a foot-washing way.

To wash the feet of others is to love them even when they don't deserve your love.

To wash the feet of others is to do good to them even if they don't return the favor.

To wash the feet of others is to consider their needs as important as your own.

To wash the feet of others is to forgive them even if they don't say, "I'm sorry."

To wash the feet of others is to serve them even when the task is unpleasant.

To wash the feet of others is to let them know you care when they feel downtrodden or burdened.

To wash the feet of others is to be generous with what you have.

To wash the feet of others is to turn the cheek instead of retaliating when you're treated unfairly.

To wash the feet of others is to make adjustments in your plans so you can serve their needs.

To wash the feet of others is to serve them with humility and not with any hope of reward.

Notice the posture of Jesus. He knelt. Imagine Jesus kneeling in front of you now, lowering himself to the level of your feet and tenderly ministering to your needs. He is in fact doing this, right now, today. And he will do it again and again, as often as you need him to care about you!

He is asking you to go and do likewise: Be the hands of Jesus that wash the feet of the people around you. You are the answer to their prayers!

By serving others, we gain understanding of what Jesus did for us 2000 years ago – and we become more observant of how he's ministering to us. We meet Jesus in the dirty feet that we lower ourselves to clean.

With Jesus, I wash the feet of:

Easter Sunday

Read:

Acts 10:34a,37-43
Ps 118:1-2,16-17,22-23
Colossians 3:1-4
or 1 Corinthians 5:6b-8
John 20:1-9
or Mark 16:1-7
or Luke 24:13-35

Reflect:

Celebrate! Today is the anniversary of the Great Surprise, and just as the first disciples were surprised to find the tomb empty, so too does God have some resurrection surprises in mind for you!

In Easter Sunday's Gospel reading, there's a lot of scurrying around and excitement and reporting some amazing news that no one yet understands. Even though Jesus had given them advance notice that he would rise again after being put to death, God's plans took them by surprise. They did not expect a resurrection. They didn't understand that it was a necessary part of the Messiah's mission.

God's plans often take us by surprise. In so many situations of our lives, we don't understand that hard times are going to produce wonderful victories.

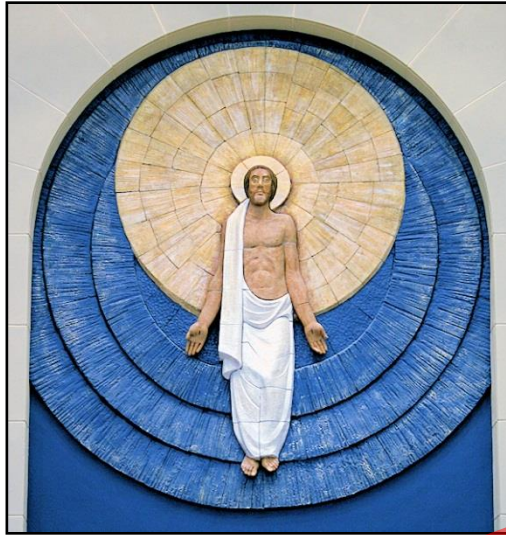
We fail to realize that the empty tombs in our lives (the losses that we grieve) are beginnings of important new growth.

We cannot imagine how Jesus is going to redeem bad times into great blessings.

We suffer through the hardships, just trying to cope, waiting for an opportunity to finally walk away from our crosses.

Meanwhile, Jesus wants to give us an Easter morning because of the crosses.

How can we recognize the glory of God when we're depressed? How can we realize our resurrections when we're cursing our crosses? It's impossible!



To be the Easter people that we're supposed to be, we have to learn how to see the hope of resurrection in the pain of the cross. We have to trust that Jesus is always there, working a plan to redeem bad into good. We have to allow ourselves to be surprised by God.

Questions for Personal Reflection:

† What trials are you still enduring?

† What cross are you still carrying?

† Are you still being nailed for something you did not do?

† Which of your desires or dreams are dying?

† Ask the Father to use your sufferings for the glory of his kingdom. What new life is this creating for you?

Questions for Faith Sharing:

† What are some of the ways in which God has surprised you?

† How is this an experience of resurrection?

Comments/Prayer Requests: