

## Lenten Reflections

### A Bible Study for Faith Sharing Groups

Using readings from Liturgical Year Cycle C

by Terry A . Modica



## Ash Wednesday The purifying walk to Good Friday

March 6, 2019

Read:

Joel 2:12-18

Ps 51:3-6, 12-14, 17

2 Corinthians 5:20 -- 6:2

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18



On Ash Wednesday, we receive ashes on our foreheads to remind ourselves of our sinfulness and our need for Jesus and what he did for us on Good Friday to redeem us from sin.

What will you do this Lent that will aid your spiritual growth? Here's a suggestion: Identify one fault — just one — and choose an activity or an abstinence that will help you overcome it.

In Joel 2:12-18, God beckons: "Return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, weeping, and mourning." This scripture and Psalm 51 reassure us that God is merciful toward those who regret their sins so much that they repent. Dealing with our need to change can feel overwhelming and shameful, but if we keep our eyes on God's mercy, we feel helped, healed, and resurrected.

By identifying and working on just one sinful tendency (especially one that's been difficult to overcome), choosing one selfish behavior or one fear or one flaw or one unloving habit as our Lenten project, we can successfully give it to Jesus, nail it to his cross, and hear him offer it up to God as he cries out, "Father forgive them ....!" It will die with Jesus, and we'll be resurrected to a new life, a new level of holiness with Jesus.

To help us on the Lenten journey of purification, Jesus is giving us, in Matthew 6:1-6 and 16-18, a walking staff. It has three parts. The bottom of it is prayer; this is what grounds us. The middle section is fasting; this is what gives strength to the staff. The top section, like a shepherd's crook, is almsgiving; it bends our heavenward heart back to earth where we minister to the people God has placed in our lives.

ALMSGIVING is a gift we give to God in thanksgiving for his generosity to us. Jesus describes two different rewards: the repayment received by hypocrites and the recompense given to those who are generous because they care. The latter are friends of God.

PRAYER can be motivated by right or wrong attitudes. Do we pray with pious words and appropriate gestures to get approval? Do we turn our attention to God only when we want him to grant us favors? Or is our prayer time truly an intimate exchange of love?

FASTING is worthwhile only if it improves our self-discipline so that we can resist sin and grow in holiness. The practice originated in Jewish history as a personal sacrifice on the Day of Atonement (the annual day for the forgiveness of sins). Today, fasting is recommended by the Catholic Church as a means of acquiring "mastery over our instincts and freedom of heart" (*Catechism* paragraph 2043). In other words, fasting helps us become holier.

By using this walking staff on our Lenten journey, we arrive at Easter with new holiness. Almsgiving converts our hearts by sacrificing our selfish attachments for the sake of others. Praying converts our hearts by sacrificing our selfish use of time for the love of God. And fasting converts our hearts by sacrificing our selfish pleasures, such as the enjoyment of food, for the strengthening of our spiritual maturity.

At the beginning of the journey, we do not wear ashes to look Catholic. It's a sign that we know we need to change!

**This Lent, I will conquer the sin of:**

## 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent

March 10, 2019

Read:

Deuteronomy 26:4-10

Ps 91:1-2,10-15

Romans 10:8-13

Luke 4:1-13



Satan is not someone to fear. Jesus already defeated all demons on our behalf, first in the desert and then on the cross. Our battle is really only against temptation and our personal weaknesses that make us vulnerable to succumbing to sin.

### Reflect:

Jesus' life is our life if we're sincere about our faith. We unite ourselves to him by receiving his body and blood in the Eucharist. We meet him in the scriptures and walk with him on the path to heaven.

During Lent, the scripture readings help us grow in faith if we listen with an ear that recognizes our personal connections to the life of Christ.

Today, we journey with Jesus into the desert. Consider your own struggles with temptation; reflect on how sin makes your faith feel barren and dry like a desert.

When we walk with Jesus, we unite ourselves to his struggle with the devil and to his victory over the devil. Our temptations become his temptations, and in our efforts to remain united to him, we reject Satan and choose the life of holiness.

The Church helps us do this by giving us ways during Lent to improve our self-discipline and conquer the self-centeredness that makes us vulnerable to sin: fasting and abstinence, alms-giving, reconciliation services, faith formation events, reading materials, and more.

Every meal and meat that we give up for Lent, every sin that we confess in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, every sacrifice of time that we make to add more prayer and spiritual reading to our daily life, and every other Lenten activity is a practice of self-denial that unites us to Jesus in the desert. Jesus fasted from food and other physical comforts during his battle with the devil, and this strategy prepared him and strengthened him for the ministry that came afterward. This is what Lent can be for us, too.

We don't always want to follow Jesus. This is what we must surrender. Then Easter will be far more meaningful, because we will emerge from Lent much stronger in our faith.

### Questions for Personal Reflection:

† How have you been succumbing to temptation? Don't be afraid to face it. Guilt is not what Jesus wants from you. What he does want is your desire to receive his help in overcoming temptation. He's waiting for you in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

† How do you know that the Sacrament of Reconciliation really works?

### Questions for Faith Sharing:

† How is it more than just a confession of your sins?

† How has it helped you grow stronger in faith?

### Comments/Prayer Requests:

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent

March 17, 2019

Read:

Genesis 15:5-12,17-18

Ps 27:1,7-9,13-14

Philippians 3:17--4:1

Luke 9:28b-36



### Reflect:

This Sunday, we see Jesus reveal the uncreated light of his true identity and we hear the Father say, "This is my chosen Son; *listen to him.*"

We experience a jump in our faith growth every time we listen to him and allow the Holy Spirit to enlighten our understanding of his words and guidance.

By listening to him, we let his uncreated light consume the darkness that still lingers within us. Then, the people around us experience more of him, because they meet him in us – in our actions, in our compassion, in our forgiveness, etc. This is evangelization!

Lent is a time of consciously focusing on our need for Christ to shed his light into our areas of darkness. When we let Jesus enlighten us so that we repent (which means change), and we seek forgiveness, and we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit's power to change us, we become more like Christ. We shine more brilliantly with him. And we enter more fully into his ministry of redeeming the world.

Although there is suffering in this ministry, we know that the pain of Good Friday is always followed by the victory of Easter.

It's in the trials and sacrifices of life – our own crucifixions – where our love changes the world. Do we dare to love others with Jesus all the way to Calvary? It's the only way to join him in Easter victory! Our trials are his blood being shed again. Our pains are his pains.

We're on the cross with Jesus, so why not embrace this intimacy with him for the sake of those who've scourged us and betrayed us?

By loving those who don't love us, forgiving those who mistreat us, and working hard to replace evil with the kingdom of God, we reveal the light of Christ to those who live in darkness.

### Questions for Personal Reflection:

† Think of a redemption you've experienced, an area of darkness in your life

that Jesus shed his light upon when he inspired you to repent. How has this change increased your holiness?

† What is he inviting you to change now, something that's been difficult to look at or hard to overcome? What would you like to hear from Jesus that will help you turn this darkness into holiness? After you figure it out, take this to the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

### Questions for Faith Sharing:

† Why is the Passion of Christ your passion? What crosses are you carrying that you hope will help Christ redeem the world from sin and darkness?

† How does your cross purify your own holiness?

### Comments/Prayer Requests:

## 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent

March 24, 2019

Read:

Exodus 3:1-8a,13-15

Ps 103:1-4,6-8,11

1 Corinthians 10:1-6,10-12

Luke 13:1-9



### Reflect:

How do you feel when someone who's been hurtful, cruel, or morally corrupt gets hit with a hardship that makes them suffer?

Our natural tendency is to rejoice because justice has finally been meted out.

Jesus addresses this in today's Gospel. He wants us to understand that we cannot truthfully say that someone is a "greater sinner", even if that person is doing more damage, is more unChristian, or doing more evil.

Every person has been created in the image of God, even the worst ones. Those who display an opposite image are nonetheless loved by Jesus Christ, who died for them. It's a tragedy that they do not live as the person God created them to be. But an even worse tragedy is for no one to invite them to turn to Christ by loving them as he loves them.

No person is an evil person. Evil-doers are children of God living in ignorance of their true identity. They are victims of evil and were seduced by it into believing that it's the best way to live. They don't understand that they can be healed by the Sinless One who conquered evil for their redemption.

We should feel sorry for them -- this is the gift of mercy. We should mourn with Jesus for the tragedy that continues within their souls -- this is the most precious gift of mercy.

All those who have sinned against you are like the fig tree in Jesus' parable. If you have access to them, he wants you to till their soil and fertilize their souls with love and with the Gospel as taught by your actions and, when they're ready, by your words.

Notice that Jesus doesn't want us to keep a diseased, disintegrating tree in the garden forever. After (and only after) we have done everything possible, if the evildoer does not want to change, the best care we can give to the garden is to cut down the tree. This means walking away or calling in the authorities for intervention and letting the sinner reap what he sows. This, too, is very loving. Fallen trees become mulch and enrich the ground for a new beginning.

### Questions for Personal Reflection:

† Who has been so hurtful that you wish God would punish them?

† Can you feel sorry for them? Can you pray for God to do good for them? In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, ask for God's help in feeling more concerned about them. In this, you'll find freedom from the anger that has been holding you captive.

### Questions for Faith Sharing:

† What steps can be taken to fertilize the lives of the problematic people of your parish or family?

† How do you know when it's time to continue trying and when it's time to chop the tree down?

**Comments/Prayer Requests:**

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent

March 31, 2019

Read:

Joshua 5:9a, 10-12

Ps 34:2-7

2 Cor 5:17-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

### Reflect:

Who is worthy to receive the love of God? In Mass, we pray, "Lord, I'm not worthy... but say the Word and my soul shall be healed." Jesus illustrates in this Sunday's Gospel reading that we are all worthy, but not because of what we do – rather, it's because of what Jesus *did* do: He died on the cross to take our sins into death so that we can rise up with him in the perpetual Easter experience of unity with God.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, it's not what the son did that made his return home acceptable. It's not his repentance that made him worthy of receiving his father's love. It's what the father did. He loved his child. Unconditionally. He loved him even while he was far away, even while he was straying in a sinful lifestyle.

The dad's unconditional love was his gift to the son even while the son was rejecting it. The gift that the son gave to his dad upon his return home was an open heart to receive the love that had always been available.

During every Mass, we come to church as prodigal children. It doesn't matter that we think we've been good Christians all week long. In some way or other, we have turned our backs on God's full, unconditional, faithful love. This is why we always start Mass acknowledging that we have sinned. Let's take this opportunity very seriously!

Next, we listen to the Word that heals our relationship with God. Jesus is speaking to you; listen in your heart. Jesus, who is the Word made flesh, has already begun to respond to your presence at Mass.



In the Offertory, we offer ourselves to the Father; it's our moment of surrender: "I no longer deserve to be called your child, so do with me as you will." What God wills is for us to be restored to a fully loving, give-and-take relationship with him and his family. And thus, in the grandest moment of the Liturgy, we receive the Eucharist as a gift of unity with God and with his whole family, the Church.

### Questions for Personal Reflection:

† In what ways do you feel like a prodigal child?

† Do you feel separated from God to any degree? What sins do you need to confess so that you can turn around and head back home? Your Father is waiting with open arms!

### Questions for Faith Sharing:

† Describe a Prodigal Son type of experience. Are you waiting for a lost child or friend to return to the Church or to your love?

† In what way have you been the child running away from God? What made you decide to return home? How did God receive you back? What convinced you that his love is unconditional and always available?

### Comments/Prayer Requests:

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent

April 7, 2019

Read:

Isaiah 43:16-21

Ps 126:1-6

Philippians 3:8-14

John 8:1-11

### Reflect:

This Sunday's Gospel reading shows us a good example of how to treat someone who is, as Jesus says elsewhere in scripture (Matt. 25) "the least of these." The recipient of Christ's compassion in this story was considered to be unworthy of life itself. She was first of all a woman, which in her society meant she was inferior to men. She was a sinner and deserved punishment. She was one single person facing a condemning crowd alone. How much more of a "least" one could anyone be?

When have you felt alone and insignificant? Perhaps you've faced a condemning crowd. Then again, have you ever treated others as if they're not important? Yes, none of us can cast the first stone.

There are many in the Church who feel forgotten and neglected. We all know some of them. Their loneliness is usually hidden from us, and if we're busy with many important responsibilities, seeking them out and giving them attention feels too overwhelming. Their needs become too insignificant to warrant the expense of our time, the development of parish resources, and the sacrifice of our personal comfort.

Divorced Catholics often feel condemned, and many who could be receiving Communion stay away because they've been misinformed about the Church's rules, and no one is reaching out to lead them back. And although the Church has been stopping abuses against children, often the lustful or abusive treatment of adults is never addressed, because they are dismissed as "less vulnerable" – they are of least concern.



Identifying the least among us and reaching out to them is a good Lenten exercise -- but only if the intention is to make it a year-round habit.

### Questions for Personal Reflection:

† Which persons are you neglecting because their situation makes you feel uncomfortable or inadequate?

† Which members of your family or parish do you avoid because you like them "least" of all?

† Begin to give them compassionate attention by praying for them, then discern if the Lord is inspiring you to do anything more.

### Questions for Faith Sharing:

† Share the story of a time when you encountered – or were – one of "the least of these". Did anyone show compassion? How?

† Where was Jesus? How was he helping?

### Comments/Prayer Requests:

## Palm Sunday

April 14, 2019

Read:

Isaiah 50:4-7  
Ps 22:8-9,17-20,23-24  
Philippians 2:6-11  
Luke 22:14--23:56

**Reflect:**

Palm Sunday begins the highest holy week of the liturgical year. Will it also begin in your life a high holy experience of uniting yourself to Jesus and to his awesome love?

There's a key phrase in the reading that we hear at the beginning of this Mass, during the Procession with Palms, which sums up this experience of your union with God: "The Master has need of it."

Why do you think the Gospel writer spent time explaining how Jesus obtained the colt for his ride into Jerusalem? It's meant to teach us something in our current circumstances. We each have a "colt" tied up somewhere in our lives. It's anything that belongs to us and is not yet being shared with Christ: possessions, money, talents, skills, creativity, time, energy, etc. The Master has need of it! Sometimes we tie these up with our own agendas and busyness. They would be useful to Jesus if we let him have them. Like the colt that Jesus rode, they could become gifts that glorify our Savior.

Palm Sunday teaches us that he deserves to be glorified for his awesome love, which he made visible on the cross. Who else would die for you -- with *that* much suffering? Jesus sacrificed his comfort and his body and blood to take the punishment that we deserve for our sins.

We should rejoice gratefully for this every Sunday with hosannas and admiration, for in the Eucharist we reunite ourselves to that tremendous love. In this communion, why aren't we grinning like lovers



who have become joined to their beloved? The answer to that is: Our "colts" are still tied to the post.

Jesus has sent his disciples to you to ask you to share your "colt" with Jesus. They are at the altar consecrating the Eucharist for you. They are writing bulletin "help wanted" blurbs. They are interrupting you at work asking for your prayers or counsel or other assistance. They are the strangers who are in need of your charitable donations.

Who have you heard asking you to become more involved in the plans of God's kingdom?

### Questions for Personal Reflection:

- † Make a list of the "colts" in your life.
- † Which ones would you like Jesus to put to good use? Spend time in prayer imagining that you are untying them and handing them over to Jesus. See how pleased he is!

### Questions for Faith Sharing:

- † Tell your group about a "colt" in your life that Jesus has need of. Why is it difficult to let go of the reins?
- † How can giving control of it over to Jesus help him complete his Good Friday sacrifice in today's world?

### Comments/Prayer Requests:

## Easter Sunday

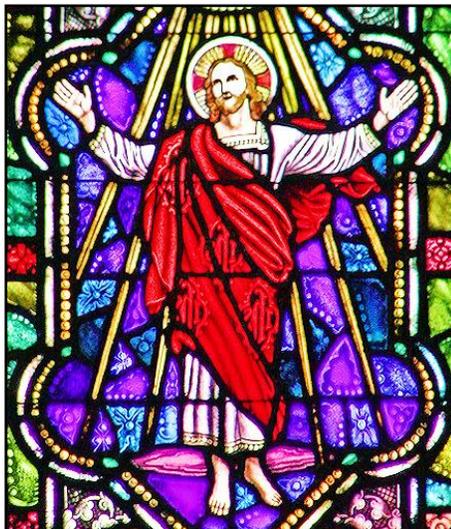
April 21, 2019

---

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  
Matthew 28:1-10

---



**Reflect:**

Alleluia! Celebrate the healing and increased faith that comes from growing closer to Jesus through the faith-building exercises of Lent and the solemn meditations of Holy Week!

The doorway into heaven is the cross. Experiencing the glory of the celebration of Easter – deep within our hearts, within our needs, within our desires – began with accepting that our sorrows and sacrifices and sufferings are our own personal connections to Jesus.

And now, Easter joy comes not only from accepting what Jesus did for you on the cross but also from continuing the journey, side by side, step by step with Jesus. When we're sincere about following Christ, if we truly want to grow in faith, we do whatever he does, united to his ministry of helping others grow in their eternal relationship with God. In this, we face the cross again and again. There is no gain in salvation without the pain of sacrificial love.

The victorious alleluia of Easter is the triumph of the cross. It's the realization that life doesn't have to be free of troubles in order to be full of joy. It's the day-to-day living out of a faith that comes from trusting that God is carrying us through the trials and bringing good out of bad.

Our cross is a soft word that we speak when someone else is angry and we feel like shouting. Our cross is a hand outstretched to comfort the afflicted when it's inconvenient and we feel like withdrawing. Our cross is a good deed that we do to those who treat us unjustly and we feel like retaliating. And our resurrection is the

joy that comes from knowing that we have made a difference in the lives of others for the sake of God's kingdom.

Love that's given when it's difficult is a suffering love, a passionate love, a salvific love, i.e., it benefits the eternal lives of others. Then, our sacrifices have a value of endless worth. This is so much better than a self-serving, easy life. It's *eternally* better! Easter Sunday Mass is the celebration of rising with Jesus into glorious victory over evil.

**Questions for Personal Reflection:**

- † What sacrifices are you suffering?
- † Write Jesus a letter that connects your pain to his pain on the cross, then celebrate that God appreciates all you have done for his kingdom; this is your resurrection!

**Questions for Faith Sharing:**

- † Describe the time when a bad experience turned into something good. What did you learn from it about God or faith?
- † How do you know that you're an Easter Christian?

**Comments/Prayer Requests:**