

Sat: 20th Feb

Lk 5: 27-32

When he went out after this, he noticed a tax collector, Levi by name, sitting at the tax office, and said to him, 'Follow me.' And leaving everything Levi got up and followed him. In his honour Levi held a great reception in his house, and with them at table was a large gathering of tax collectors and others. The Pharisees and their scribes complained to his disciples and said, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?' Jesus said to them in reply, 'It is not those that are well who need the doctor, but the sick. I have come to call not the upright but sinners to repentance.'

Jesus' earliest disciples came from all walks of life – there were simple folk and educated men, rich ones and poor. Yet the one thing they had in common was their response when Jesus calls them. *They left everything and followed him.*

Just as Jesus notices Levi sitting in his office, he sees us in our daily situations – our boredom, our stress, our dissatisfactions, our emptiness... and he calls us not to dwell in these, but to get up, leave these behind and follow him. It is not so much financial wealth that Jesus calls us to leave behind, but our inner dispositions that trap us in unhappiness. These could be our endless string of desires, our need to be in control, our struggles for human acclaim, etc.

The repentance Jesus calls us to is a turning away from the people and things that want to take God's place in our hearts. Only then can we be free to follow him, to imitate his way of loving and giving in our own lives.

What will be our response to Jesus' invitation as he says to us, "Follow me," today?

Lord, I cannot follow you with so much baggage in my life. Help me leave them behind so that I can be free to love with you!

Sun: 21st Feb

Lk 4: 1-13

First Sunday of Lent

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert, for forty days being put to the test by the devil. During that time he ate nothing and at the end he was hungry. Then the devil said to him, 'If you are Son of God, tell this stone to turn into a loaf.' But Jesus replied, 'Scripture says: Human beings live not on bread alone.' Then leading him to a height, the devil showed him in a moment of time all the kingdoms of the world and said to him, 'I will give you all this power and their splendour, for it has been handed over to me, for me to give it to anyone I choose. Do homage, then, to me, and it shall all be yours.' But Jesus answered him, 'Scripture says: You must do homage to the Lord your God, him alone you must

serve.' Then he led him to Jerusalem and set him on the parapet of the Temple. 'If you are Son of God,' he said to him, 'throw yourself down from here, for scripture says: He has given his angels orders about you, to guard you, and again: They will carry you in their arms in case you trip over a stone.' But Jesus answered him, 'Scripture says: Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' Having exhausted every way of putting him to the test, the devil left him, until the opportune moment.

'If you are the Son of God...'

The Devil launches his temptations to Jesus by attacking his identity. He knew that Jesus drew his direction, his mission, his dignity, his security from his relationship with God. If that was shaken, the Devil could make Jesus turn away from God.

How about us? What is the anchor of our lives? What defines our identity? If we base our self-worth on our career, our popularity, our beauty or wealth, then the Devil is able to shake us and lead us to sin easily. These anchors are unstable and transient. Rather, let us follow Jesus and anchor our identities to our relationship with God. *He is our God and we are His children, beloved for eternity.* This alone will be our reason for choosing God's way over the world's.

When, like Jesus, we are secure in this awareness, we will reflect the Father's love for us towards others in our lives. The temptations of the Devil will no longer have power over us.

Lord Jesus, it's a consolation to realise you also experienced temptations to sin, but you overcame them. Help me when I am tempted to find strength to follow you.

Mon: 22nd Feb

1Pt 5:1-4

Feast of Chair of Saint Peter

I urge the elders among you, as a fellow-elder myself and a witness to the sufferings of Christ, and as one who is to have a share in the glory that is to be revealed: give a shepherd's care to the flock of God that is entrusted to you: watch over it, not simply as a duty but gladly, as God wants; not for sordid money, but because you are eager to do it. Do not lord it over the group which is in your charge, but be an example for the flock. When the chief shepherd appears, you will be given the unfading crown of glory.

Who are the 'elders' among men today? It is each one of us who is in relationship with Jesus! Entrusted to our care are the lives of the people who have yet to know Jesus' love for them, and those Christians who struggle to live in relationship with Jesus.

We all have personal contact with someone who is searching for God, for truth, for happiness, for love... The answer to their search is Jesus, and our lives must help them realise that. Only we can bring Jesus' love, his truth and peace to them. St. Peter tells us to give them a shepherd's care, to be an example for them.

Over and above our fasting and abstinences, let us ask Jesus to show us how we can be good shepherds to the flock entrusted to our care, how we can live so as to point others to God through our way of life.

Dear Jesus, thank you for trusting me with your people even though you know my weakness. Help me to tend to them the way you want me to.

Tues: 23rd Feb

Is 55: 10-11

For, as the rain and the snow come down from the sky and do not return before having watered the earth, fertilising it and making it germinate to provide seed for the sower and food to eat, so it is with the word that goes from my mouth: it will not return to me unfulfilled or before having carried out my good pleasure and having achieved what it was sent to do.

This is the way our God works; nothing that He sends out is pointless and ineffective. As followers of Jesus, our lives are the continuation of his; our mission the extension of Jesus'. Do we realise this?

We have been sent to carry out the Father's will to bring sustenance and fulfilment to the hunger of the people. Our lives are not for the mere pursuit of success, wealth, status, adventures, etc. It is easy to get carried away by the values of the world that surround us in all our waking moments. But today, let us withdraw from all the distractions and listen to God alone.

He will speak to our hearts and show us how our lives can give Him pleasure and bring His love and peace to the world. If we find the people he sends us to difficult to minister to, let us not give up and turn away, but ask God to help us fulfil our mission.

Lord, what do you send me out to do today? I will speak, I will reach out to love those you send me to. Help me when my strength is not enough.

Wed: 24th Feb

Jonah 3: 1-10

The word of Yahweh was addressed to Jonah a second time. 'Up!' he said, 'Go to Nineveh, the great city, and preach to it as I shall tell you.' Jonah set out and went to Nineveh in obedience to the word of Yahweh. Now Nineveh was a city great beyond compare; to cross it took three days. Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city and then proclaimed, 'Only forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown.'

And the people of Nineveh believed in God; they proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his robe, put on sackcloth and sat down in ashes. He then had it proclaimed throughout Nineveh, by decree of the king and his nobles, as follows: 'No person or animal, herd or flock, may eat anything; they may not graze, they may not drink any water. All must put on sackcloth and call on God with all their might; and let everyone renounce his evil ways and violent behaviour. Who knows? Perhaps God will change his mind and relent and renounce his burning wrath, so that we shall not perish.' God saw their efforts to renounce their evil ways. And God relented about the disaster which he had threatened to bring on them, and did not bring it.

The people of Nineveh were living in decadence, basking in their riches and success, enjoying drinks and all forms of comforts. They did not have time for God in their lives. The same description could be applied on the people today. We live in a world where all forms of enjoyments and comforts are made available. We are constantly busy trying to achieve more, and are too tired, too caught up with life to bother with the one who gave us Life.

Will the prophet Jonah's warning to our world today be received with the same response? Will we all hear and turn from sin? Heeding God's call begins with us; our conversion will be the light for others to follow.

Like Jonah travelled deep into the city, to declare God's message in the midst of the people, so we must bring God's call to the workplace, the homes, the recreational areas, etc of the people we are sent to. We do not preach idly from afar, but enter into their situations and constraints to share in their difficulties and support them in answering God's call to turn from the worldly attractions towards Him.

Dear Lord, help me as I try to live today with you and to bring your love to the people I meet.

Thurs: 25th Feb

Mt 7: 7-12

'Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. Everyone who asks receives; everyone who searches finds; everyone who knocks will have the door opened. Is there anyone among you who would hand his son a stone when he asked for bread? Or would hand him a snake when he asked for a fish? If you, then, evil as you are, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

'Everyone who asks receives...' Does this seem too good to be true? If it is true, then why does it seem so often our prayers go unanswered, or we do not get what we ask for?

This is because Jesus is talking about what is truly good for us, what helps us grow in our love, our wisdom, our generosity, our patience, etc. Jesus tells us to have faith, to trust that our every prayer is heard, and answered in God's time. This can seem really ludicrous in today's society, where we demand quick and definite responses.

During this season of Lent, it is a good time to remind ourselves that our God does not function by the same rules as our society. His thoughts are way beyond our comprehension. We can take comfort in His promise that His love for us is eternal and unchanging. Knowing that our God who sees all and knows all loves us, we can rest assured that He will answer our pleas for love, peace, strength, joy and direction. What He asks of us is our faith, to wait in hope for His reply.

Dear Jesus, thank you for the assurance of your love for me! When I feel like trusting myself over you, help me remember that your love never fails!



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Fri: 19th Feb

Is 58:1-9a

Shout for all you are worth, do not hold back, raise your voice like a trumpet. To my people proclaim their rebellious acts, to the House of Jacob, their sins. They seek for me day after day, they long to know my ways, like a nation that has acted uprightly and not forsaken the law of its God. They ask me for laws that are upright, they long to be near God: 'Why have we fasted, if you do not see, why mortify ourselves if you never notice?' Look, you seek your own pleasure on your fastdays and you exploit all your workmen; look, the only purpose of your fasting is to quarrel and squabble and strike viciously with your fist... Is that the sort of fast that pleases me, a day when a person inflicts pain on himself?...

Is not this the sort of fast that pleases me: to break unjust fetters, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break all yokes? Is it not sharing your food with the hungry, and sheltering the homeless poor; if you see someone lacking clothes, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own kin? ... Then you will cry for help and Yahweh will answer; you will call and he will say, 'I am here.'

At the beginning of the season of Lent, God himself teaches what fasting really means. It is not the physical abstinence from food that causes us to be hungry and grumpy. No! This is the season for authentic abstinence – from selfishness, from apathy, from injustice, from oppression... We are to abstain from ways that separate us from God's way! This is the type of fasting that pleases God – our denial of our inclination to sin and our determination to follow Jesus.

This year, let us be determined to make our Lenten fasting the sort of fast that pleases God, a purification of our hearts to be filled with His unconditional love for the people He sends us to.

Jesus, teach me how I can make my fast pleasing to God. How can I let the oppressed free, feed the hungry and shelter the homeless in my life?