

Homily First Sunday of Lent

Lenten Blessings to you all! Some people don't know what the word "Lent" means, yet I'm sure they've gone through it all their lives.

Lent means springtime. Believe it or not, it means springtime. And lent it is short for is lengthening, you see. Lengthening days are a sign that winter is over and the springtime draws near. (Although with recent storms that may be hard to believe.) I love when the light is present longer each day.

So feel better now; it's a happy thought. So the first thing to remember about Lent is it's not meant to be a dark period. It's supposed to be filled with hope, just as Advent. Christians are people who live on hope. That is the essence of the Paschal mystery. Death, however present in our life, we seek it be transformed into new life during Lent.

Don Berry Graham told this story about hope. In September 1988, Hurricane Gilbert hit the Louisiana coast. At that time it was considered the "Storm of the century." It battered the shoreline, severely disrupting the shrimping business. Many shrimp boats were lost, causing great concern for several families dependent on shrimping for their livelihood.

On the morning news I watched an interview with a shrimp boat owner. He was asked how the storm would impact the shrimpers. With the devastation of Gilbert as a backdrop, this man said, "well, there is a good side. The storm will have stirred up the bottom of the ocean, making for better shrimping once we're able to get back out there." This man understood hope! Lent is also a time where we're supposed to give up things.

When I was a kid we gave up all the things that a child, a young child or an older child, would dream of. I had to give up candy, I had to give up potato chips and pop. My birthday often falls in Lent. In 1974 had to give up cake on my birthday because it fell on Ash Wednesday. It seemed like the adults or the priests couldn't run out of things to give up. It was always give up this and give up that and I never really mastered the giving up bit. Giving up meat on Friday did not bother me because I love fish.

But many years ago I met a priest. He said, "You should stop saying what you should give up and start asking what we can do."

And he had a whole list: you can be compassionate to the rest of the family or be compassionate to those who are suffering. You can try to love and understand when all love and understanding seems empty, when the people which you are with or the people that you love but they can't seem to get things straight...

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Compassion is God's — God's own special virtue. He is the compassionate one. Sometimes we think of God as creating sort of like little difficulties that we might overcome and gain merit or whatever that was. It's not true. God can only love. Let me repeat this.

God can only love. God cannot hate and cannot hold grudges.

Abraham used to pray to God in this way. He would say, "You've got to help my cousin Lot, who is in terrible condition in one of those evil cities."

And God would say, "Well, why should I help him, he never even thinks about me?"

And then Abraham pulls the string, he says, "But you're God. You have to help."

What does God do? God loves, God lives, God serves.

Remember that: God loves, God lives, God serves.

What are we supposed to do?

We're supposed to live, love and serve. Very simple. It's lasted two thousand years. That's the doctrine of the Messiah.

Why did Jesus come? "I came to love, to live with you and to serve."

All these things I mention because it's Lent. We need to embrace this season to grow in the ways of God.

I think what we can give as a gift to our family, our friends and to everybody else, is we can give them two gifts.

One is to learn how to be patient with people, and the second one is learn how to love the way Jesus loves: no conditions, deepening our understanding, and, with this kind of love, bringing ourselves and others a new flowering of hope — a new life, very often.

And it will give us the best gift of all, which is to face ourselves so that we can live with the wonderful gift of faith, with great love in your heart, but, most of all, to keep your hope strong and let no one take away from you what God has given to you, which is how to have faith, how to have hope and, most of all, how to love each other. May this be our experience of Lent 2024.