

LENT – 2017 – 40 days

Day 1

As we start this year's programme, there's a couple of things we should remember: Our human nature has a tendency and the tendency is to start something and not end it. They say that the pathway of life is littered with the wrecks of good intentions. So we start with a good intention, but often we don't have the wherewithal to complete what we start.

In fasting, in prayer or in any of these things - *when you start* you will have an enthusiasm, but after some time your flesh will kick in. It wants to get out of the restraint of getting up early, of getting here, of sitting in prayer - and it will fight you. When your nature or flesh fights you and you give into it, you go back to your old position.

The thing to do is to make a resolution today: I will complete the 40 days. That itself is a victory over your own self. You find internal happiness by having little victories over your own self. When you make up your mind to pray and you go against your nature and learn to do it, you start having internal joy - because you have a victory over yourself. If you say no to an addiction and fight it, and go against yourself - at first it looks like hell, because it gives you an attack. But if you resist it, you start having respect for your own self.

Many people are unhappy because they can't respect themselves. Those who can't respect themselves see nothing in the world that is respectable. That's why we are dissatisfied with everybody and everything.

Let's start by making the choice: For 40 days we are going to sit at the feet of the Lord. The process is this for those who can: 6-6:30, half an hour in the mass, then one hour here until 7:30 and if you have the time, go and sit at the blessed sacrament in silence. Allow the Lord to minister to you.

Today is Thursday, the first week of Lent, and we start with a choice:

Deuteronomy 30:15

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction.

God is giving us a choice and saying, "You have to choose between life and prosperity on one side, and death and destruction on the other side." It seems pretty obvious - who is the fool that will choose death and destruction against life and prosperity? But all of us are such fools. We have this tendency to choose death and destruction over life and prosperity. That's why God is offering us this choice consciously. **Why do we do that?**

Deuteronomy 30:16

For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commands, decrees and laws. Then you will live and you will increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

Then God is explaining it simply: "If you obey my decrees and laws and follow what I tell you, I will bless you in the new land." It looks very simple. You follow the commands of God and He will bless you.

Deuteronomy 30:17-18

But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

It looks easy and self-explanatory. You obey God and it will bring blessing and prosperity; if you obey your nature and the world, you will suffer. You can close it down and say to go and obey God - but the problem is not so simple. The problem is, in this journey or in life, obeying God is actually a pain. You have to go against your nature, you have to do things you don't like, you have to sacrifice and you have to face pain and struggle to obey God.

To obey your nature is pleasure –

- you do what you like,
- you follow your desires,
- you run after what your heart has,
- and it satisfies you immediately.

Partying, having a good time, having many relationships rather than being committed to one is much more pleasurable than sacrificing, remaining faithful and obeying the commands of God. That's why these people had a problem.

The same problem can be seen in the gospel:

Luke 9:22

And he said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."

Here is the formula:

Sacrifice and pain in obedience to God leads to long term fulfillment and satisfaction.

Self-indulgence and giving in to yourself leads to short term satisfaction and immediate gratification.

If a drunkard takes two drinks early in the morning, immediately you're energized - but soon that person becomes of no use to themselves or to anyone else.

Christian discipleship is to do with short term sacrifice, short term self-denial - knowing that on the long term, there is a great blessing in store. That's what makes self-denial inviting.

Luke 9:23

Then he said to them all, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up this cross daily and follow me."

A lot of us would like to have the rewards of Jesus without the sacrifice.

There is a new kind of Christianity in the world: Jesus has paid the price and you do the dance - you have no sacrifice because Jesus has paid the price and you can self-indulge. You can be prosperous, you can be rich, God is going to bless you and you're going to have a grand time because Jesus has paid the price. That is not in the gospel - that is a lie.

The gospel is very clear: If anyone is to follow Jesus, you have to have short term denial for long term satisfaction. If you do it in reverse, you'll have short term satisfaction and long term issues. These 40 days are like that. You have to choose the long haul over the short term.

How do you do that? It all begins with a life of prayer. You have to put in your roots into the heart of God. The psalms give us what to do:

Psalm 1:1-2

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night.

It is very simple: Let's make this morning the launching pad of 40 days of bathing in the word of God and prayer. It's hard on the short term because you have to make space and time.

It is my own experience as well. Because of the volume of work that we do, I patted myself on the back and excused myself from the commitment to prayer. I justified it by saying I'm doing enough work and it looked good because when I did things, God seemed to be blessing it. Things were happening, people were coming.

- On the long term, little by little, worries started encroaching on my mind - it happened imperceptibly.
- Then the things of this world and people started becoming more powerful in my mind. I began to think, "This person seems to be really strong and if that person works against me then I'm gone."
- I started becoming insecure and fearful.
- Then it started disturbing my sleep.

- Then when I thought about God, I started having doubts. "Can God actually deal with these issues?"

- Then you become threatened. When you become internally threatened, you don't switch off and your defenses tend to remain awake.
- That's what you call tension. I can't switch off because I have to defend myself.
- There is anxiety because I have nobody to protect and defend me. I'm stressed because I have to deal with myself and my needs - there is nobody else.

Short term, I don't want to pray because it's a pain to commit to prayer, and long term I'm having major issues.

Here is the key: Each of us has to choose this. Then when God gave me the grace of prayer, things started changing:

Psalm 1:3

He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.

For the middle eastern Jew this was a big thing because there was no rain. Because there was no rain, plants and trees didn't grow everywhere - it was a desert. The chance of a tree surviving depended on the water it received. He says, "If the tree is planted near water, it keeps alive and grows." Water is the Holy Spirit and the flowing water is the word of God and the Holy Spirit.

When you have the word of God and the Holy Spirit working in your life on a regular basis, morning and night, quietly things begin to change. Initially it is a sacrifice - the TV is beckoning, the cricket matches are beckoning and so many other things are calling. You have to make a choice to go against your nature.

After some time, you begin to enjoy living with your roots in the stream.

- First of all, you start receiving inner revelations through the word. It isn't just you reading and understanding the scripture - but suddenly without your awareness, you start receiving insights from God. God speaks to your heart and you realize it.
- Then you start experiencing His love, then you start feeling safe. When you start feeling safe, switches are turned off and you sleep like a bull because you're secure and relaxed and rested and your life starts feeling jolly good.

Isn't that what you wanted anyway? You wanted a good life and you wanted to live happy, but you don't get it by simply doing nothing and wishing for it - you do it by making the sacrifice. Then you start having a song in your heart, and when you start ministering things begin to happen, God begins to jump out from inside you and touch others, changes begin to take place, breakthroughs come, what you tried for with so much effort and never achieved, in a moment God makes it happen.

Then you start realizing what an idiot you were. Having such a beautiful opportunity, we have lost it in activity because we didn't want to make the little sacrifice.

When I gave up smoking - I used to smoke 25-30 cigarettes a day - in my dreams I saw cigarettes. Then your taste comes back, which you never knew you had lost, the freshness comes back, your appetite comes back and you breathe clean air again. Then you realize, "What have I done for so many years?" That's what we need in these 40 days, to discover the secret heart of God.

Today I'm going to read to you a reflection given by a Dutch priest called Henri Nouwen. He is a famous spiritual author who had his own issues in life. Thank God for the 20th century and the media because we find broken saints. We ourselves are broken people on a journey with God.

Henri Nouwen himself, in the latter part of his life, came out and said he was a person with a tendency towards being gay. At that time it was a shock to the world because at that time Henri Nouwen was known worldwide to be one of the great spiritual masters of the 20th century. He made a declaration that he was gay and struggling with it his whole life. In this struggle he was also celibate because he was a priest. In that struggle to be faithful to God, he discovered secret places that few people ever discovered. So Henri Nouwen will be a great help for us broken people to find God.

Jesus came to us to help us overcome our fear of God. Look inside yourself and ask that question: Do you fear God? In my own life, for many years that was the fundamental problem of surrender to me. I was afraid of God and I thought He would harm me more than He would love me and care for me. I thought He would allow me to be hurt, therefore I always kept control of my own life because I thought I must control my life because God can sometimes be harmful to me.

As long as we are afraid of God, we cannot love God. Love means

- intimacy,
- closeness,
- mutual vulnerability and a
- deep sense of safety.

Some of us experience this in our marriages. By surrendering and obeying God, God has blessed us with marriages where we can be vulnerable to each other, open to each other, intimate - not just physically but emotionally intimate - because we feel safe with the other. My spouse is for me, not to shame me, not to hurt me, not to humiliate me, not to use me - but actually to love me. Experiencing that is to find meaning at the human levels.

But it runs deeper with God. We have someone with whom we can have security. He loves me so deeply. As I found out over the last few months as I prayed, God does not simply love me. Today I want to tell you, God does not simply love you. Sometimes I thought God loves me like I love my dogs. I love them but my dogs are unable to be on par with me, to give me an equal relationship. But I love them. Then again I thought God loves me as a principle of His goodness. Of course He doesn't like who I am, He

doesn't like my nature, He doesn't like my behaviour - but He has chosen out of His goodness to love me and it is a choice He has made.

I never thought that God could be attracted to me. But as I read the gospels and prayed over months, little by little the revelation came. God is attracted to me like a man is attracted to a woman or a woman is attracted to a man. He wants to be with me, He wants to have a relationship with me, He wants to know me and He wants to be known by me.

Then the revelation ran deeper for me one day when I suddenly realized: This God is in love with me. This God is madly in love with me and wants me to reciprocate and respond to His invitation to love. This is the gift the Lord is offering us this morning - a journey from duty, from obligation, from intellectual understanding. A journey into intimacy and fellowship with the Lord. A love that is attracted to me - just like Jesus was attracted to the sinners and he went looking for them, because when he saw each sinner - even Peter - he saw the possibilities that God had for that person.

Maybe when he saw Peter for the first time, he saw the possibilities the Father had determined for him. "He is going to take my place, he is going to head the church, he is going to be the man that is going to be the Rock." He saw all these possibilities, but it was lost and suppressed under a broken nature - only to be surfaced by forgiveness, by loving, by mercy.

In the same way, what is hidden in our hearts by God, the greatness, the goodness, the fullness, the maturity that God has hidden in our hearts can only be surfaced by forgiveness, by mercy and love reaching into us. Can we allow His love to flow into our hearts?

At first it's only thoughts and words, but that's how the communication starts. We accept those words by faith and over the 40 days, little by little, the Holy Spirit will take the words we have accepted by faith and transform it in our hearts into a living experience. Suddenly that love will become so real inside us.