

LENT 2017 - day 17 – March 24th

So today is the last day of our third week. We are getting into the rhythm of walking with God. It's beautiful to seek His face early morning because it keeps you fresh. Initially I curse to get up in the morning because I'm not a morning person, but as you get into the rhythm I find the internal joy and freedom of seeking God early morning.

Hosea 14:1

Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God. Your sins have been your downfall!

We have an opportunity here to examine the steps of the spiritual journey. This spiritual journey has many levels and many people are not aware of that.

Today is a good day to chart that path. The basic step that anyone has to keep is returning to God.

Until you know this step we are caught in this trap of karma, cause and effect and carrying the burden of our background and nature to the grave. Many people do that and they can't change because self-effort won't take you.

Here is the first level of the journey - if you have messed it up and your life is all disturbed, all you need to do is return to the Lord. Many people don't do that. They try to fix it themselves. There is no returning to God unless they have a major crisis. They are not turning with a change of heart, but they are turning so that God will give them a solution.

Some people don't have a solution, but they have a long tale of woe - God has never helped them. They say, "We have prayed for this and nothing has happened in our lives." That bitterness itself is a sign that we have not actually fully returned to God. The call is to return:

Hosea 14:2

Take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to Him, "Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips."

The fruit of our lips is thanksgiving and praise. Thanksgiving and praise is given from the lips of those who have enjoyed mercy and forgiveness. **Any first step is to return to the Lord.**

The four steps is having an effect over so many years because it has this basic principle at work: Come as you are. How else can you come?

- If you can't fix yourself,
- If you don't have a solution for yourself,
- If you can't change yourself - **come as you are. Return to the Lord.**

Once you come, you need to do the second step - Give the truth of your heart. That's where many others fail. They never tell the truth or admit it to God. We have got so used to lying, pretending and

projecting that we have even lied to our own selves. So you get compulsive borrowers. When they want to borrow money from someone, if you tell them, "You may not pay this back," they get very angry and hurt. They say, "You think I'm not going to pay?" But they have short term memory loss. After they borrow, the memory is gone. But at that moment they are convinced they will pay back. They are fooling themselves. You're in a bad place because you're in the hole and you're never going to come out, because your methodology is putting you back.

You have to give the truth, and the next verse brings it out beautifully:

Hosea 14:3

Assyria cannot save us...

You need to know a little bit of history to appreciate this. Assyria was among the superpowers - like Russia and America and China. Assyria and Babylonia were superpowers of that time. So the Israelites were in the middle of the superpower conflict. To their South was Egypt and to their north was Assyria. Whenever one of them became big and strong, they sat eyes on the other superpower. Unfortunately, when they had to march to the other superpower's territory, they had to march through Israel. So it's like the elephant and the ant - elephants fight and ants die. So that was the problem of Israel.

What they did was, when Egypt was becoming strong, they went to Assyria and said, "Please protect us from Egypt." When Assyria was getting strong, they went to Egypt and said, "Please help us to protect ourselves from these people." The same superpower politics are going on today. Go to china and protect yourself from India, make sure Pakistan is your friend. So you play superpower games. What he is saying is, "Don't think your game can save you."

Hosea 14:3 continued

...We will not mount war-horses. We will never again say 'Our gods' to what our own hands have made...

They had other temptations like defending themselves and making their own idols so they could protect us. Our people are still so primitive. Somebody says the statue is crying and off they go by the busloads to see the crying statue. We are hoping it will give us some answers. The primitive level is just beyond the surface. Recently someone discovered that statues are drinking milk and now everyone is taking milk and feeding. I asked what these gods are doing drinking milk without helping people.

We (Catholics) too have this tendency. It's a thin line between idol worship and respecting the saints. Many people cross that line. That's something we have to admit.

In the theology of the church there is no room for worshipping any statue. You venerate and it is called veneration. Veneration is used in normal terms as well.

We say he is a "venerable" old man - a person worthy of respect. The church offers saints for veneration. You worship only God.

The Catholic Church is very clear, but the line popular people make is the

problem. One day someone came and said, "Do you know you're doing idol worship?" They brought a text from the Bible and said that we have dropped the commandment of worshipping idols because Catholics are worshipping idols. It is not so. In the theology of the church, you venerate saints and you worship God.

If you look at the text of the mass, not even the Virgin Mary has a place in it - because she herself is venerated and not worshipped. Only the Holy Trinity is

worshipped. A lot of Catholics don't know where to draw the line. I told this person that the theology of the church doesn't teach that and I am comfortable with what the church teaches. Many people don't know what the church teaches - they only see what people are doing. These poor people can't go beyond a figure because that's their limitation. So the church ministers to that need by offering them images of saints. *But the image of the saint is an invitation to see the saint - we are not saying that this image is the saint.*

Those days there were no digital photographs, no videos, no films. If you say St. Anthony, God only knows what St. Anthony looks like. ☺ You have a statue to tell you who St. Anthony is - he becomes more real with it. Through that we see his life and character.

What has happened is, we have come from a background of a Hindu environment - even the Buddhists are caught with it. In pure Buddhism you can't have any image because you're working out your own internal journey. But in every temple, you get a 'devalé' and in this devalé you get a 'kapuraala' because of the Hindu influence into Buddhism.

So it is like going abroad and having a photograph of your loved ones. In my iPad my background image is my grandson. When I put it on I see him. That doesn't mean I'm worshipping him, but I just remember him, I think about him when I see it and that's it. That is the use of statues and images in the church.

Unfortunately many people don't know this. Instead of condemning, lead them to the Blessed Sacrament. In the Blessed Sacrament is the living presence of

Jesus. It's not a memory or a thought - it's the living presence of Jesus. He has come for the community and for each of us. He has come in the mass because He wants to live inside us - that's why He has come into the Eucharist. Initially the Eucharist was to be distributed because He came to live inside us. As the community grew and everyone didn't come to mass, they kept the Blessed Sacrament in order to give it to people who couldn't come. That's how they started keeping it.

Then as it grew into the centuries, there were controversies. There was this person who said that the Lord is not alive in the Holy Eucharist. The church responded by saying, "Do adoration of the Eucharist, because it is the living Jesus." So Jesus is alive in the Eucharist for you and for me. The Lord who has

come for you and for me is adored. That's why worshipping the Eucharist is not an idol worship. It is established by the Lord Himself.

St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians says, "Do not consume the Eucharist without recognizing who He is." First you recognize who He is and find out that it is Him, alive. The saints are one thing and the Holy Trinity is something else. There is a clear distinction. Unfortunately we Catholics have never reflected or thought - we just go along. If someone comes and tells us something, down we go.

So the first step of any spiritual journey is returning to God and receiving forgiveness and mercy. But that's only the first step.

So we have another second step one in the gospel:

Somebody asked Jesus what the greatest commandment is, and he answers:

Mark 12:30

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.

When I first heard this I thought that God is really unfair. 😊 He has created me and said, "Love me with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. What about me?" Actually, it is only those who experience the love of God that can love God. Many people have not even taken the first step of returning to God, yet we are telling them that they better love God.

How can we love God when our own broken life is manipulating everything and everybody?

There are many people who are so caught up within themselves that they can only think about themselves. So you tell them to love God and they think, "Yes, let me see what I can get by loving God." You're not yet saved. When you return to the Lord with all your heart, when you give Him the truth and you have mercy and forgiveness - after some time you begin to experience His security. He actually looks after you and you get divine interventions. God starts giving you breaks, opens doors and helps you. Quietly you learn to trust Him and see He is actually able to meet your needs. You have to taste that and see.

When you start tasting the security and the care and the love of God, you become free of your own self. Otherwise until that moment we are preoccupied with our own selves. Then we start receiving another mission in life: To love God. You enjoy loving God, you enjoy intimacy with God because now, you're no longer living for yourself but God is looking after you. This is called the internal journey. First you come to Him because you have issues and problems, you give Him the truth and the struggle of your life, next you're forgiven and you experience His mercy and divine providence and then quietly you begin to realize that you don't need to be preoccupied with yourself because the Lord is looking after you. When you're relaxed in that, you start appreciating and loving God in return.

That really consumes you and it's a higher purpose in life. As if that's not enough, when you're loving God and having intimacy - He gives you the mission:

Mark 12:31

The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these.

This is the next level of the journey. When you love God and as you have a relationship with Him, He points you in the direction of other people and says, "Get involved in their lives." Many of us can be spiritually isolated - you have walls put up. I find it in my old life as well. Of course I can say I love God, but when it comes to serving people I see the walls come up. I want to defend myself, protect myself and live my own life instead of laying my life down for others.

We have a journey to go on. First is salvation - you need to be forgiven and find the mercy of God when you return with your brokenness. As you're loved and secured He calls you to an intimacy with Him - an intimacy with God points you in the direction of other people. Only then can we lay down our lives. Otherwise we will never lay it down. Why should you lay down your life for someone else, when our own problems are enough for us?

Today I was reading the reflection of St. Catherine of Siena. St. Catherine is a 13th century Dominican nun. She is called the doctor of the church. That means that her theology is accepted as revelation from God.

This is what she writes: *I long to see you bound in the sweet bound of charity.* She says that she wants us to also be people who love others. *The bond that held the God-man, nailed fast to the wood of the most holy cross.* There was a bond that held Jesus nailed to the cross. **What is that bond?** It is love for others. The crucifixion of Christ is a result of love for others.

You know that if charity had not held him, neither nails nor cross could have. It was love that held Jesus nailed to the cross. Otherwise he could have used his power and gotten off the cross in double-quick time, released the power, shaken the earth and walked off. But he didn't because he suffered out of love.

This kind of insight you cannot receive in even 20 years of journey. You have to journey a lifetime to find this. You have to find liberation within your own soul first, to try and even comprehend what is being said. She is discovering loving God. She is finding reasons to love God. One of the reasons she found is this kind of love.

Charity is the sweet, pleasant bond that joined human nature with the divine. It was love that made God become a human being - joined human nature with love. *And for what reason? Only love.*

First you are looking at God to manipulate Him, to use Him, to get Him to get you things, solve your problems, and meet your needs. From that journey you go into the journey of loving God. You begin to see the beauty and wonder of loving God because you're becoming free of yourself.

Then she talks about the third level of the journey: *No one can show no greater love than*

to give one's life for a friend. O boundless love; if you praise the love that gives one's life for a friend as being the greatest love there can be - how much more deserving of praise is Your love for us, for we have become your enemies and you gave your life, paid the price of your blood for us.

She says loving your friend and giving your life for him is a great thing. **How much more to do it for an enemy. That's the love of God.**

Spirituality in one way is a dangerous game because it drives you crazy and makes you unbalanced. It is the insanity of being loved so deeply that makes you lay down your own life.