

REFLECTION FOR MARCH, 2021

Theme: Returning to the Father

Scripture:

“Yet even now,” declares the LORD, “return to Me with all your heart, with fasting, weeping, and mourning.” So rend your hearts and not your garments, and return to the LORD your God. For He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in loving devotion. Joel 2:12-13

A priest explained his conversion like this: "I wasn't a bad priest. I just wasn't a good one. I did all that I was supposed to do. I 'said' Mass every day; I 'said' the Breviary, the Rosary and my prayers every day. I did my prayer, half an hour in the morning and half an hour in the evening. I 'read' the Gospel and a spiritual book for 15 minutes every day. I did all that and thought that was fine. I wasn't unhappy but I wasn't happy either."

"On the second day of my retreat I was reading the parable of the Prodigal Son. Suddenly the words of the older brother hit my soul: 'he answered his father, "Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command"'. Here was a son who was more like a butler. And I felt like that too: I was giving to God what 'I had to', but reluctantly. I was like the Pharisees. Then I looked at the Crucifix. I felt tears coming to my eyes. There, bleeding, was Him suffering for me to become a child... not a servant. I felt I was cheating Our Lord. From the Cross He seemed to be saying: 'This is not it! I didn't shed my Blood just to make you a butler! I died to make you a child! I don't want your 'things'. I want your love. I want your heart. I want you!"

"That day I asked Mary to help me to stop being a 'butler of God' and to become a child... to stop saying Mass and to start celebrating It; to stop doing my prayer and to PRAY instead. Since then, I don't feel like a servant who fears: I'm now a child who LOVES!" Mary, my Mother, I ask the same for myself.

Perhaps like this priest, we have found ourselves doing the ‘right’ things, wherein we are not “unhappy, but [not] happy either”. For many of us, we have kept the rule: attended Mass, repeated the responses in the Liturgy of the Hours, said the Rosary, done our spiritual reading, but are somewhere still away from the Father. The invitation to return is as much for the older brother in Luke 15 as it is to the younger one. And while we know the journey of the younger one, the journey of the older brother is left unanswered, perhaps because that is left for you and I to write.

“Yet even now,” declares the LORD

There is a longing in this call. “Yet, even now” suggests while a lot of time has already passed, all is still not lost. There is at once both urgency as well as an assurance of hope in this statement. It is almost as if the invitation has always been open; the choice is only ours.

“return to me with all your heart”

It is significant that the first words out of Jesus’ mouth in the synoptic Gospels is ‘metanoia’. He begins his ministry saying “*Repent [metanoia] and believe in the good news*” and that, in a nutshell encapsulates his entire message! Sadly our English translations don’t quite do justice to ‘metanoia’ with the word ‘repent’. Over the years metanoia has come to imply a complete U-turn, not just a detour from the course of our direction but heading in the very opposite direction. However, the biblical meaning of *metanoia* has far deeper connotations.

The word, *metanoia*, comes from two Greek words: Meta, meaning above; and Nous, meaning mind. Fr Ronald Rolheiser, OMI explains its meaning this way: “Metanoia invites us to move above our normal instincts, into a bigger mind, into a mind which rises above the proclivity for self-interest and self-protection which so frequently trigger feelings of bitterness, negativity, and lack of empathy inside us. Metanoia invites us to meet all situations, however unfair they may seem, with understanding and an empathic heart. Moreover, metanoia stands in contrast to paranoia. In essence, *metanoia* is “non-paranoia”, so that Jesus’ opening words in the Synoptic Gospels might be better rendered: Be un-paranoid and believe that it is good news. Live in trust!” When we look at the lives of the two brothers, the younger one needed a U-turn, a change and a returning to the Father, much like the understanding of repentance as we have always had, but when we look at the life of the elder brother, his ‘return’ to the house needs more of putting on the bigger mind of compassion and understanding. It is not will power that can change our servitude to identity as sons and daughters of the Father, but actually asking for a true *metanoia*.

Trust is the key word. After all, do not all frantic spiritual activity or restlessness in prayer point to a desire to win God’s favour, to please him, to placate Him thus in a way betraying our lack of trust in His goodness and love?

Do we identify with the younger brother or the older brother? How can we ‘return’ to the Father’s house to enjoy the banquet?

“With fasting, weeping and mourning. So rend your hearts and not your garments”

While a lot of stress is laid on the abstinence and fasting aspects of Lent, and rightly so, the first part of the verse must be seen in light of what follows- *rend your hearts and not your garments*. The externals are important, but must not become an end in itself. They are only a means to *metanoia*. It is our mind, our attitude that needs change. And so if abstinence or fasting causes us to look down upon those who love their non vegetarian food and are not able to give it up, or those who are unable to keep a day of fast, then we have not yet put on a bigger mind. The Bigger Mind makes the rain and sun fall equally on the good and the wicked.

If our fasting causes us to be irritable and unproductive, there is little point of that fast. If our prayer doesn't quieten our hearts and at the same time, challenge us into action, we have missed the point of prayer. If our almsgiving gives us an excuse to close our eyes to the atrocities around us, we are only appeasing our conscience. Our irritability, our disquiet, our closed eyes all reveal the areas that need His grace and should lead us not to despair but a greater trust in the One who has called us and continues to beckon us.

When the Church as a Mother asks us to give up meat for Lent, she is asking us to give up our crutches in exchange for the cross, to give up the things we have grown to love so dearly that we have quieted our longing for the One Great Love. For some people, it could be denying the craving for delicacies, for someone else it could be abstaining from social media, for perhaps all of us it could be giving up our jealousies in exchange for true appreciation for the other, giving up our anger for love, cynicism for gratitude and mournfulness for joy! We must never lose sight of the fact that 'giving up' is always to take up something more beautiful, more sublime and lasting.

But our abstinence or fasting or generosity is only the beginning of the journey, it is only meant to spur us in our faith, not replace it, and certainly not to be a feather in our caps! Ironically, fasting was always a means for humbling ourselves (Ps 35:13) but we have made it a matter of pride! No further could we be from the truth, if what was designed to show sorrow for our sinful ways becomes a means to pat ourselves on the back; not to talk of the religious game we are playing!

How do I view people who are unable to fast during Lent or abstain from their choicest food?
How is my mood or attitude after a day of fasting? How do I face disruptions and interruptions in my spiritual activities particularly during days of fasting & abstinence?

and return to the LORD your God.

It is interesting that Joel repeats the cry to return to the Lord. While this could perfectly be without reason, there are sometimes two returns needed, if not more, to the Father's house. One

from a distant land, when covered in sin and shame we find ourselves living worse lives than that of pigs, and we come 'to our senses' and race our way back to the Father. The other is from the threshold of the house, the house we have grown up in, and slaved and slogged but not understood the Father or His love. In both cases, we are outside the house, but sometimes the journey from the threshold to within the joyous merrymaking is a longer distance to cover than that from distant lands.

What are the barriers that I need to cross or even break to enter into the Father's house? Can I truly be merry in other's progress or achievements and accolades?

For He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in loving devotion.

Herein we find the image of the Father who patiently awaits and welcomes both his sons into his home. When we struggle with our punitive, petty ways he is gracious, when we stammer with our rehearsed speeches, unable to deliver a decent apology, he is compassionate, when we ask for our inheritance only to squander it, or refuse to partake in a welcome home party for our younger brother, he is slow to anger; strangely however, at all times, in all circumstances he isn't just loving, but ***abounding in loving 'devotion'***. The word devotion seems a misfit for a Father to his son/ daughter or for that matter for God to his children. Shouldn't it be the other way around? And yet, devotion is something we don't exactly see from either of the sons but we certainly see it in the Father!

Putting on the 'bigger mind' or metanoia looks exactly like these qualities- gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in loving devotion. *Which of these virtues do you feel you need to grow in?*

Finally, isn't Lent all about giving up our slavish fear and anxiousness about a petty God and rest as daughters in the loving embrace of a doting Father?

Questions for self-evaluation and prayer:

Q1. How can I make Lent more a meaningful season for me and for those around me?

Q2. What would I willingly choose to give up this lent; something that I am attached or addicted to; something that will take me back to my loving Father?.