

Monday, February 12, 2018

James 1:1-11

"...for you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance."

James 1:3

When I was in seminary one of my fellow seminarians had a poster on his door. The poster showed a rag doll folded up inside a folding chair. The caption read: "The truth will set you free...but first it will make you miserable." I think St. James, whose letter we begin today, would surely agree.

James begins his letter saying that "Consider it joy...when you encounter various trials *for you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.*" Put another way, "Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger." Or "The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable."

I'm not sure that James is canonizing pains, trials, and hardships. I think he is simply saying that these things happen and when they happen they don't need to cause us to lose our faith. As I get older it does become easier to deal with trials, setbacks, and disappointments, in part, I believe, because I know I can still find the presence of God in them. Now, whenever I go through a difficult stretch of life I always try to find some extra quiet time so that I can discern how God is present in the darkness. I no longer doubt that God is there; sometimes, however, I do need to look a little harder.

Fr. Tom Clegg

Tuesday, February 13, 2018

Mark 8:14-21

"Watch out, guard against the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod."

Mark 8:16

One of the constant themes of Mark's Gospel is that those first disciples of Jesus had lost their way. They had forgotten what they learned from Jesus. Mark was showing them the way back—the way back to Jesus. This thought is found in the Sunday reading of a couple of weeks ago when, after healing Simon Peter's mother-in-law, Mark states, "When it was evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were ill or possessed by demons. ***The whole town was gathered at the door.***" Mark was saying to them that they all were ill and they all had their own demons. They all needed the healing touch of Jesus.

Today, Mark is saying the same is true for the apostles—even the 12 lost their way at times. He does this by pointing out how quickly they forget what he can do for them. Obviously his statement about the "leaven of the Pharisees" is not because they are out of bread...Jesus can multiply loaves anytime he wants. He wants them to see that their disbelief increases like leaven—it grows...not only for them but for others in their community.

We might never know often does our lack of faith, our doubt, lead others a lack of faith or doubt too. But it is a challenge to me to make sure that I proclaim with my words and actions what I believe in the core of my being: God is with me at all times!

Fr. Tom Clegg

Wednesday, February 14, 2018

Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

“When you give alms...when you pray...when you fast....”

Matthew 6:3, 5, 16

Some years ago I gave a homily on Ash Wednesday in which I lamented the fact that as a Church we seem to have lost the desire to “give up” things for Lent in an effort to “do something” for Lent in a more positive manner. I then went on in the homily to point out that Jesus did not say *if* you give alms, pray and fast...he said *when* you give alms, pray and fast. After the homily I had a parishioner (perhaps in her 60’s) say to me, “It’s obvious you weren’t taught to beat yourself up over how much you pray or fast. If you had been, you would be singing a different tune.”

And she was right. I was never “beat up” over fasting and praying. Perhaps that is why I think they are still needed and still relevant today. You see, I don’t think fasting is about giving things up just for the sake of giving things up. I believe fasting is about giving things up in order to make more room for the things of God and the things of faith. When we fast, we create space for Jesus. When we pray we connect with Jesus. When we give alms we become more like Jesus.

I guess when all is said and done, it should not be an either/or—either we give up or we do something positive. Instead it should be a both/and. We both give up and we do something positive. After all, that is the life Jesus modeled for us. Blessed Lent!

Thursday, February 15, 2018

Luke 9:22-25

“If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me.”

Luke 9:23

It was at a funeral for a priest (I don’t remember which priest it was) and Fr. Al Ajamie was the homilist at the Mass. This was the gospel reading. Fr. Ajamie made the statement, “Jesus said we must take up our cross *daily* and follow him...And we keep asking, ‘Lord, can I have it every other day?’”

There is something disheartening about a savior who asks us to pick up a cross in order to be his disciple. Yet that is what we have! And we all have our crosses too!

Your doctor says that there is a spot on your lung that doesn’t look good. Take up your cross. Your boss tells you there is a chance there might be layoffs in the company and you’re the newest member of the team. Take up your cross. The winter doldrums seem a little bad this year. Take up your cross.

It seems to me that very few days come without some element of the cross involved. So perhaps recognizing that is the beginning of taking it up every day to follow our savior.

Friday, February 16, 2018

Isaiah 58:1-9

“This, rather, is the fasting that I wish...”

Isaiah 58:6

In his Prayer of Trust and Confidence, Thomas Merton says, “And the fact that I think I am following your will does not actually mean I am doing so.” I think Isaiah would relate to that line as he challenged the people of his day to see the reason why they do what they do. Fasting is good...but it seems it falls into second place behind works of mercy and social justice: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, releasing prisoners, and sheltering the homeless. Quite a challenging reading!

When I was in seminary, Fr. Aurelius Boberick, OSB used to say that Catholics have an “amazing dexterity for missing the point!” It is easy at times to get so caught up in the beautiful rituals of any religion that we forget why we do what we do. We miss the point of the ritual in the first place.

Don't think for a moment that God is saying fasting is bad—God is simply reminding me that my fasting needs to be accompanied by works of mercy and justice as well.