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Saturday afer Ash Wednesday

Date: Saturday, March 9, 2019 | **Season:** Lent | **Year:** C
First Reading: Isaiah 58:9b–14
Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 86:1–6 | **Response:** Psalm 86:11ab
Gospel Acclamation: Ezekiel 33:11
Gospel Reading: Luke 5:27–32
Preached at: the Jesuit Institute **in the** Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa**.**

Today's readings are about restoration and healing, and today, I hope, you have had some time to be restored and to at least begin to recognize areas where you might need God's healing. After journeying with Moses up the mountain and seeing the burning bush and entering into the solitude of hearing I am saying that he accepts you and calls you, you then considered your image of God against the image proposed by Jesus in his parable of the Prodigal Son, or – as Russell explained – the welcoming Father. You prayed for new eyes to see how God sees you. As beloved. As chosen. As healed. As called to a conversion. Today I'd like to say a few words about conversion.

In our first reading from Isaiah we read the encouraging words:

> your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in. (Isaiah 58:12)

I think a conversion can be a step towards reconciliation and restoration. Now, Isaiah is writing this before the temple walls were rebuilt after the exile, and for him, he sees that Salvation will not only bring light into the darkness and water to the parched land, but also equip the returning exiles to rebuild the city of God.

Let's ask ourselves now what are the dark areas in my life that need light? What are the dry areas of my faith and my heart that need to be gently soaked by the living water of God's word and truth? What are the habits or relationships in my life that need conversion or rebuilding?

In this time of Lent we can rebuild our relationship with God, and we are called to restore our right relationships with others and ourselves.

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In the Gospel we see how Jesus called the hated tax collector Levi to join the community of his disciples. Jesus in the Gospel continues his mission of restoring all Israel, including "tax collectors and sinners". No one is outside Jesus' Kingdom.

To describe his salvific work as repairer and restorer, Jesus chooses a medical image, quite common in the ancient world. He is a healer, a physician, who comes to restore the sick and repair the human spirit.

What is the healing, the conversion, that we need in our lives today? How is Jesus calling you towards a conversion that will make you repairers, restorers and reconcilers in your own lives?

Conversion – at least for most people – is not a once off event. I think it is a process. One that might need to be repeated several times before one truly 'comes to one's senses'.

Firstly, I want to suggest (with acknowledgement to Bernard Lonergan) as we leave today that there may be three areas of our lives we might want to focus on during the rest of Lent.

The first area of conversion has to do with recognising our need for God. Perhaps we've tried for too long to do without God? Or perhaps we say we need God in our lives and we go through the motions, but we do not put aside the time to listen to what God has to say to us. Can we give ourselves that solitude to hear what God is trying to tell us? Lent is a time where we can open ourselves up to becoming conscious of the transcendent realm where God is, and to notice and see God's actions in our lives. To do this we need the right image of God. If we use the right image, we might well be surprised to discover God's presence while we were 'still a long way off' as we heard in the Prodigal Son this morning.

A second area of conversion might be towards greater moral integrity in our life. I do not mean becoming perfect, but rather trying to become authentically more humble and willing to accept oneself and see yourself as God sees you, with the ring, the robe and the feast in your honour – and to not stay down when you fall but rather to cultivate the courage to keep trying to do the right things, not for your own sake, but because they are the good things to do. These are the things that God, who we have begun listening to again, is calling us to do.

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The third conversion might be towards a greater sense of integrity in your intellectual positions. We talk about being of one mind and heart in worshiping God. Sometimes what is in our minds does not always match what is in our hearts – or vice versa. Whilst we can often be converted to do certain things – how often do we do what we believe? Perhaps there are areas of our belief that need to be talked through with God. Perhaps there are questions you have about yourself, your faith, or about God. We should not be afraid of the questions in our lives. We believe Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Truth cannot contradict. Lent can be a time where you can talk to God about those things. Listen to what he says to you.

Finally, when one talks about conversion, one should ask what is it that we are being converted from, and what is it we want to be converted to. I would suggest that if we want to grow our love with God, very often we have to grow away from our own ego's, our own selves.

And this is perhaps the scary part. They say the longest journey is from the head to the heart. It requires us to be conscious of ourselves, aware of who we are. Earlier today we asked you to think about your Image of God. Now I want you to think about the image of yourself. Because we believe we are all made in God's image. Can you see God's image in you? Can you take delight in you as God takes delight in you? Let go of the resentments and disappointments. As Russell said this morning – do not allow your past to dictate your future. See yourself as God sees you. Lent offers an opportunity for this.

During Lent we test ourselves, by traditionally giving up something or taking something on, not for its own sake, but so as to stretch ourselves as it were, Godward. Our Lenten sacrifices are not mere duties, but they should be catalysts for entering into a deeper relationship with Our Lord. In fact, the point is not so much to give up something, but to give up ourselves. What I mean by this is to reposition God at the center of our lives and to remind ourselves that we are not the center of the Universe. It is thus in this way, by helping others or denying ourselves something, that we can physically and tangibly remind ourselves that it is God to whom we should be directed and to whom we should return to. This is most easily done by realising and remembering how much God loved us, and what He endured for us. The point is not to dwell on the suffering – but on the love of God.

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So just as in the Gospel, this season of Lent is an opportunity to gather us in table fellowship – in relationship – with Jesus and with one another.

Let us ask God now how and where he wants us to be reconcilers, restorers and repairers in the relationships in our own lives.

Let's pray that he will give us the grace to continue the work of conversion in our lives so that we might always have God at the center.

And finally, let's pray that we might always see the world and each other, and ourselves, as God sees them.

Amen.

[The idea of this homily was based on Bernard Lonergan's three moments of conversion: Religious, Moral, Intellectual.]

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