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Friday of the 3rd Week of Lent

Date: Friday, March 28, 2025 | **Season:** Lent | **Year:** C
First Reading: Hosea 14:2–10
Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 81:6c–11b, 14, 17 | **Response:** Psalm 81:11, 9a
Gospel Acclamation: Matthew 4:17
Gospel Reading: Mark 12:28–34
Preached at: the Chapel of the Most Holy Name, Kolvenbach House **in the** Archdiocese of Lusaka, Zambia**.**

The book of Hosea ends as it began: with a summons to return. "Come back to the Lord your God," the prophet pleads, "for your iniquity has been your downfall" (Hos 14:2). Hosea speaks to a nation that has wandered far from its covenant with God, entangled in foreign alliances and false worship. And yet, even now, the Lord does not speak words of condemnation but of invitation. He does not call his people to grovel but to speak—to take words with them, to say, "Forgive all iniquity, and take what is good" (v. 3). It is a simple yet profound insight: true repentance is not about placating an angry God but about returning to the One whose love has never wavered.

And what is God's response? Not grudging pardon, but lavish mercy. "I will heal their defection," He declares. "I will love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them" (v. 5). The love of God is not calculated. It is not doled out in proportion to our merits. It is free. It is full. It is life-giving. Hosea's imagery is lush and abundant: Israel shall "blossom like the lily," "strike root like the Lebanon cedar," and "flourish like a garden" (vv. 6–8). This is the promise of repentance—not merely that our sins will be forgiven, but that our souls will be restored, that we will grow, that we will live.

In the psalm, we hear not just of God's faithfulness but of God's sorrow. "If only my people would hear me," the Lord laments, "if only Israel would walk in my ways!" (Ps 81:14). There is a tenderness here, an ache in the divine voice. We often think of God's commands as burdens, but in truth, they are the path to blessing. "I would feed you with finest wheat," God says, "and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you" (v. 17). It is a striking image: even in the wilder-

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ness, even in the hardest places, God can draw forth sweetness. But will we listen? Will we trust that what God desires for us is not restriction but freedom, not scarcity but abundance?

This question lies at the heart of today's Gospel. A scribe—one of the legal scholars of Israel—approaches Jesus, not with hostility, but with curiosity. "Which is the first of all the commandments?" he asks (Mk 12:28). It is a familiar debate in Jewish tradition: of the 613 commandments of the Law, which is most central? Jesus does not hesitate. He begins with the Shema, the great confession of Israel: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength" (vv. 29–30). But then he does something unexpected. He does not stop at one commandment. He gives a second: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (v. 31).

The scribe is impressed. He repeats Jesus' words and adds a crucial insight: this love "is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices" (v. 33). Here is a man who understands what Hosea proclaimed long before: "It is love that I desire, not sacrifice" (Hos 6:6). And Jesus sees it. "You are not far from the kingdom of God," he tells him (v. 34). It is a remarkable statement. The kingdom is not first about rituals, but about relationship. It is not a place we enter, but a reality we embody—when we love God wholly and love our neighbor as ourselves.

This is the core of our Lenten journey: returning to love. Not love as sentiment, but love as fidelity, as justice, as mercy. In our world today, we see the consequences of its absence. In Zambia, as in so many places, we hear the cries of the poor, the displaced, the forgotten. We see a world where economic gain is often prized above human dignity, where political division can harden hearts, where even within the Church, we sometimes fail to listen to one another. And yet, the readings today remind us: love is not a suggestion. It is the very measure of true faith.

One saint who lived this well is Blessed Dominic Collins, a Jesuit brother martyred in Ireland in 1602. He was a soldier by trade, but when he encountered the Society of Jesus, he found a different kind of battle—the battle for souls, the mission of reconciliation. He became a humble brother, serving in whatever way he was needed, witnessing to Christ not with words, but with his life. Even in

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prison, even facing death, he did not waver. He understood that love of God and love of neighbor were inseparable, that true faith is not about power but about fidelity. His life poses a challenge to us today: Do we seek to dominate, or do we seek to serve? Do we live for ourselves, or do we lay down our lives for others?

Jesus' final words in today's Gospel are haunting: "No one dared to ask him any more questions" (v. 34). Perhaps because they knew the next question would not be one they could ask of him, but one they had to ask of themselves. So too for us. As we stand before these readings, before this call to love, we must ask:

- What holds me back from loving God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength? What lesser loves have taken His place?
- Who is the neighbor I struggle to love? Where am I being invited to show mercy rather than judgment?
- How will I let love—not mere obligation, but love—be the guiding force of my life this Lent?

The kingdom of God is not far. It is as near as the next act of love.

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In preparing this homily, I consulted various resources to deepen my understanding of today's readings, including using Magisterium AI for assistance. The final content remains the responsibility of the author.