

Introduction

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land ...
– T.S. Eliot, “The Waste Land”

Spring is a time of rebirth after a cruel death. It demands that the seed slumbering quietly in the earth suffer the violence of being split open. Aroused from its sleep, it is beckoned forth from its shell. Like the seed, we too are called forth from our protective shells. And we can grow only if we listen.

To listen is the primary act of obedience. Obedience, derived from the Latin *oboedire*, means *to listen*. And to truly listen involves a courageous openness and a readiness to change. If we are unwilling to change, then Lent has no point. For only in the new life offered to us at Easter do we find meaning in the dying of Lent.

Lent, derived from the Old English word *lencten*, means spring. Lent is a time of rebirth; it is a season to allow God’s seed to germinate within us, a time to do those things necessary to break out of our self-centered, encapsulated lives into a new and more expansive life of love in Christ.

The following reflections invite us to ponder our lives and to open our listening hearts to the voice of God, so that Lent will truly be Lent — a spring that buds forth new life.

Ash Wednesday
to Saturday

Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6:1–6, 16–18

Jesus commends us to fast, to pray, and to give alms but cautions us not to perform these actions for the sake of acquiring a reputation for holiness.

In T.S. Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral*, Thomas à Becket is accosted by a temptation to martyrdom, that is, to win fame and glory by his death. When he realizes the nature of the temptation, he exclaims, "The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason.... A Servant of God has chance of greater sin and sorrow, than the man who serves a king. For those who serve the greater cause may make the cause serve them" (44–45). Becket's words go to the heart of today's gospel. Giving alms, prayer, and fasting, all good deeds, may be done for the wrong reason. Acts meant to serve God may also serve our egos.

Deeds that serve God differ from those that serve our egos because of the *motive* that underlies them. As John Chrysostom comments upon today's gospel, "Since even if you should enter into your closet, and having shut the door, should do it for display, the doors will do you no good" ("Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew" 132). We

can draw as much attention to ourselves by standing in a corner as by basking in the limelight. In this regard, Jerome warns us, “Don’t seek the fame of avoiding fame. Many who avoid having witnesses of their poverty, their tenderness of heart, their fasting, desire to win approval for the fact that they despise approval” (160–61). The motive out of which our choices arise is all-important because it determines the nature of our actions. If we give alms in order *to be known* to be generous, then our action is not a deed of generosity but of pride.

It matters little what we pride ourselves in because the lure of pride does not lie in the *object* of our pursuit but the *distinction* that it confers upon us. But, ultimately, the distinction that pride bestows betrays those who practice it. For whenever our pretense has evoked the praise of others, we become enslaved to the admiring audience that we have created. The Greek word translated in today’s gospel as hypocrite (*hypokrites*, meaning actor) is instructive in this regard. Every actor knows that he is only as good as his last performance and stands in dread of a bad review. The more our self-esteem depends upon the opinion of others, the more insecure we become.

Being insecure in self-esteem is the core dynamic of what psychologists call a narcissistic personality disorder. This might strike us as strange because narcissists often project a grandiose persona of self-assurance. But their personas are fragile. Narcissists easily become depressed and full of

self-doubt when they receive less than rave reviews for their performances. They are like kites. When the winds of approval and applause are favorable, narcissists fly high; when the winds of acclamation subside, they fall into the doldrums of despondency and despair.

Most of us have a narcissistic wound, for we are insecure in the knowledge that we are loved. So we go through life wearing masks, conning parts, playing roles, giving performances in the hope of winning love or at least curtailing disapproval. In this regard, we are all frightened hypocrites.

There is nothing wrong with *receiving* praise, but the more we *seek* it, the more we become addicted to it. Jesus is straightforward in what we must do. We must fast from any behavior that is designed to win the approval of others. Jesus' counsels to "go to your room and pray in secret ... keep your deeds of mercy secret ... groom your hair and wash your face when you fast" are but three examples.

Augustine writes that when we fast from our play-acting, we are "cleansing the eye by which God is seen" ("The Lord's Sermon on the Mount" 92). We cannot see our Father who dwells in secret if our minds are preoccupied with our performance. Saint Teresa tells us, "All harm comes to us from not keeping our eyes fixed on [God]" ("The Way of Perfection" 97). As we begin Lent, let us direct our gaze inward, to the God who dwells in secret and who loves us.

Thursday After Ash Wednesday

Deuteronomy 30: 15–20/Luke 9: 22–25

Jesus tells us that in order to follow him, we must deny our very selves. But this “denial” of self is in truth an acceptance of our deepest self. For when we love, we “choose life” (Dt 30: 19).

In a village lived a rabbi esteemed for his ability to see into the human heart. In the same village also lived an atheist who wished to expose the rabbi as a fraud. One day, the atheist saw an injured bird lying upon the ground. Picking it up he said to himself, “At last, I have my chance. I will go to the rabbi when he is surrounded by his admiring congregation and while holding the bird behind my back I will ask him, ‘Rabbi, I have a bird in my hand. Is it alive or is it dead?’ If he says that it is dead, I will show him that it is alive. However, if he says that it is alive, I will break the bird’s neck and show him that it is dead. In either case, I will expose the rabbi as a fraud.”

So as the rabbi’s congregation had surrounded him in the town’s square, listening to him and asking him questions, the atheist wormed his way through the crowd and asked, “Rabbi, I have a bird in my hand. Is it alive or is it dead?” The rabbi, gazing deeply into the man’s eyes, discerned his

evil intent. So he replied, “The answer is in your hands.”

“I set before you today life and prosperity, death and diversity ... blessings and the curses. Choose life, then.” The choice is in our hands. For each day life places in our path people whom we must choose either to love or not love.

Think of your capacity to love as a room in which you live. The room is small (ten by twelve feet) and spartanly furnished with an army cot, a small wooden desk, a chair, and a bare hundred-watt bulb hanging from the ceiling. One day you open the door of your room and look down the darkened corridor. You see light streaming out from beneath a door. You leave your room, and hearing the door lock behind you, you rush down the corridor. You open the door and stand in amazement. The room is twenty feet by twenty-five feet. It is carpeted, has a large desk, a queen-size bed, an easy chair, and two lamps with shades. After a few months in this room, you begin to feel cramped and anxious. So once again, you open the door and look down the darkened corridor. You see light streaming out from under another door. Once again, you rush down the corridor. Beyond your wildest expectations, the new dwelling place has a lavishly furnished living room with a bay window, a fully equipped kitchen, a spacious bedroom, and a complete bath. After a few months ...¹

Paradoxically, the spiritual life demands that we lose our life in order to find it, or in Cardinal Newman's words, we must "risk upon Christ's word what *we have* for what *we have not* [italics added]" (299). To *deny* one's very self is to *affirm* one's deepest self. Faith bids us to leave the constricted circumference in which we live and embrace a more expansive life of love. This does not mean that we must leave our jobs, change our residences or go to the foreign missions. But it does mean that we change our behavior. It means that we become more expansive in acts of charity, for we cannot hope to follow Christ home to God without increasing our love for our neighbor.

The two great commandments grow in unison. The sixth century hermit Dorotheus of Gaza compares God to the hub of a wheel and us to its spokes. Because the spokes converge on the hub, the closer we travel to God the closer we come to one another. "This is the nature of love: to the extent that we distance ourselves from the center of the circle and do not love God, we distance ourselves from our neighbor; but if we love God, then the nearer we draw to him in love, the more we are united with our neighbor in love" (Clément 272).

Friday After Ash Wednesday

Matthew 9: 14–16

John the Baptist's disciples approach Jesus with the objection, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?" Jesus responds that it is not appropriate for his disciples to fast while he is still among them.

Today's gospel seems to focus on fasting, but it concerns itself more with two other issues. First, *why* do we engage in any particular behavior? Second, is the behavior *appropriate*? Let us take each issue in turn.

Why do we engage in any particular behavior?

"Why do we and the Pharisees fast often but your disciples do not fast?" This is not a question but a criticism that smolders with anger. Ask yourself this question. Why would you be angry with people who do not practice a form of asceticism that you do, since their choice has no negative consequences in your life? It neither imposes upon you nor deprives you of anything. So why be angry?

One possible answer is that when we feel forced to do something that we really don't want to do, we envy others who are not burdened by the false sense of obligation that weighs us down. This

is akin to workaholics who resent people who are not driven. In their hearts, they condemn the less-driven as lazy and irresponsible. But in truth, workaholics are envious. They cannot relax without feeling guilty or feeling afraid of having their image as indefatigable workers tarnished. Likewise, some people engage in spiritual devotions simply because someone else has recommended them highly. They do not want to lose the esteem of these people, so they bind themselves to devotions that do not fit the unique contours of their souls.

All of us are unique and must follow our own path. When Saint Thérèse was novice mistress, she described working with her novices in this fashion: “It is absolutely necessary to forget one’s likings, one’s personal conceptions, and to guide souls along the road which Jesus has traced out for them without trying to make them walk my own path.... There are really more differences among souls than there are among faces” (238–40).

In the same vein, Abbé de Tourville wrote, “Thomas Aquinas says that the angels differ as much from one another as if they belonged to different species. This is equally true of each one of us.... One of the hardest but one of the most absolutely necessary things is to follow our own particular line of development, side by side with souls who have a different one; often one opposed to our own.... We must be ourselves and not try to get inside someone else’s skin. David