

I can almost guess what many of you are thinking. Well, maybe “many” isn’t exactly the right word. I think I know what SOME of you are thinking. You’re thinking, “Are you kidding me? Another super-long Gospel?” And you would not be wrong. Over the past three weeks we have heard three of the longest Gospel passages we ever have the privilege of hearing at Mass (except for the Passion of course). My guess is --- even the story of The Prodigal Son (another pretty lengthy tale) isn’t quite as long.

Two weeks ago we heard about the Woman at the Well. Last week, The Man Born Blind. And today, The Raising of Lazarus. And I will agree with those of you who find it hard to stay attentive throughout these long Scripture passages. Secret --- Clergy do too! And yet the Church (in its wisdom) strings them together on three consecutive Sundays (in Cycle A) rather than spread them out during the year. And the fact that it’s Lent is no accident either. And that should tell us something.

A woman goes to a well to quench her thirst, and leaves with much more than she could have imagined. And she is never the same.

A man, blind from birth, has sight given to him by a man he doesn’t even know. And he is never the same.

And a man walks out from a tomb in complete disbelief at what had happened --- shocked to hear that it was his friend who had brought it about. And he is never the same.

And at the heart of each of these three stories is something relatively simple, and yet life-changing at the same time. You see, the one element present in each of these three stories is an encounter --- an encounter with Jesus, an encounter with God --- an encounter that changes everything. For the woman at the well it is through a profound conversation. For the blind man it is the healing touch of a stranger. For the dead man it is a power conveyed through the command of a dear friend.

“Lazarus, come out!”

Three encounters with Jesus. Three unique situations. Yet, the outcome is ultimately the same --- individuals being changed in ways they could not have imagined --- defying any other explanation other than being from God. They each, in their own unique way, ended the day much different from the way they started it. Everything was new. Everything was full of hope. Everything was full of new possibilities.

And that lies at the heart of what Lent is all about. It’s not about beating ourselves up. It’s not about doing every single devotion “right”. It’s certainly not about “proving” to others (or ourselves) that we have the willpower to give something up. Rather, it’s about coming out of these forty days --- that is, waking up on Easter morning --- changed forever. And not because of our goodness, or through our power or efforts, but through the power of our loving and merciful God who wants nothing more than to change us --- not for a day, but forever.

And that takes an encounter.

Sometimes we fall back on the idea that God can do whatever he wants to do. And that is hard to argue with. God has all the power. God has the wisdom. God knows all. God is provident. God calls the shots. And God's way is always the best way.

And yet . . . (There's always a "yet" isn't there?) . . . God gives us true freedom, a precious gift. And that means that our loving God never forces himself upon us. The choice is entirely ours. We can accept his grace or not. Be open to his love and mercy or not. Be his presence in this world or not. Be new creations or be the same old people we were yesterday. None of that comes about until we say "yes" --- until we are willing to be open to every good thing God wants for us, open to embracing a new way of thinking and seeing and acting.

And that takes encountering Jesus. That takes conversing with him. That takes allowing him to touch us. That takes listening to his voice, and responding to it in faith. And the practices of Lent can help us do precisely that. The journey of these forty days can help lead us to precisely where we need to be. If we let it.

If we let HIM.

The truth is, when we hear Jesus calling for Lazarus to, "Come out!" --- we need to also hear him saying those same words to us, calling us out from the tomb, calling us from the darkness . . . the darkness of our selfishness . . . the darkness of our resentment and hate . . . the darkness of our grudges and desire for revenge . . . the darkness of our prejudices . . . the darkness of our sin.

My friends, may "never being the same" not only be the ending to the story of the woman at the well, the story of the blind man, and the story of Lazarus. May it also be the ending of each of OUR stories this day, this week, this Lent --- and for all time.

Peace be with you all Sisters and Brothers in Christ

Keep Safe.... Keep Well

Hugs to all.