

LENTEN
GOSPEL
REFLECTIONS

BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

WITH REFLECTION QUESTIONS BY
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INTRODUCTION

Friends,

Thank you for joining me as we journey together toward the great feast of Easter!

Lent is a season for refocusing on the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ, so that we will be ready to embrace the good news of the Resurrection.

Why this emphasis on suffering? Because Christ saved us through an act of suffering. He bore in his own person the weight of our sin and died for us on the cross, where suffering and love coincided.

And the Church is the Body of Christ, which participates in Christ. Therefore, we shouldn't be surprised that we will be called upon to suffer out of love. In the economy of grace, God may use our suffering to bear the burden of another member of the Body of Christ, just as one system can take up the work of another, or one organ can support another.

So as we begin with Ash Wednesday, let us resolve to focus on Christ's suffering, and to unite our own suffering—through fasting, prayer, almsgiving, and reflection on the Stations of the Cross—with the suffering members of the Church. It is not the destination but the journey that will ultimately transform us.

Peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Robert Barron". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a cross at the beginning.

Bishop Robert Barron

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FEBRUARY 14, 2024

Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6:1–6, 16–18

Jesus said to his disciples: “Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father. When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win the praise of others. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

“When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners so that others may see them. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

“When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites. They neglect their appearance, so that they may appear to others to be fasting. Amen, I say

to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to be fasting, except to your Father who is hidden. And your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you.”

Friends, in today’s Gospel, the Lord prescribes prayer, fasting, and almsgiving as our Lenten disciplines.

The Church traditionally says there are three things we ought to do during Lent, and I put stress on the word *do*. In recent years, we’ve emphasized the interior dimensions a little too much—that Lent is primarily about attitudes, about ideas and intentions. In the traditional practice of the Church, Lent is about doing things, things that involve the body as much as the mind, that involve the exterior of your life as much as the interior.

The three great practices of Lent—prayer, fasting, and almsgiving—are three things you do. This is going to sound a little bit strange, but my recommendation for this Lent is, in a certain way, to forget about your spiritual life—by which I mean forget about looking inside at how you’re progressing spiritually. Follow the Church’s recommendations and do three things: pray, fast, and give alms. And as you do, pray to draw closer to the Lord as the center of your life—and the reason you do everything.

Reflect: How do you think the practices of Lent, specifically prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, can lead us to a deeper relationship with Christ?

FEBRUARY 15, 2024

Thursday after Ash Wednesday

Luke 9:22–25

Jesus said to his disciples: “The Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised.”

Then he said to all, “If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. What profit is there for one to gain the whole world yet lose or forfeit himself?”

Friends, our Gospel today lays out Jesus’ conditions for discipleship. For all of us sinners, to varying degrees, our own lives have become god. That is to say, we see the universe turning around our ego, our needs, our projects, our plans, and our likes and dislikes. True conversion—the *metanoia* that Jesus talks about—is so much more than moral reform, though it includes that. It has to do with a complete shift in consciousness, a whole new way of looking at one’s life.

Jesus offered a teaching that must have been gut-wrenching to his first-century audience: “If anyone wishes to come after me,

he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” His listeners knew what the cross meant: a death in utter agony, nakedness, and humiliation. They didn’t think of the cross automatically in religious terms, as we do. They knew it in all of its awful power.

Unless you crucify your ego, you cannot be my follower, Jesus says. This move—this terrible move—has to be the foundation of the spiritual life.

Reflect: Where is your ego overly dominant? What do you have to do to crucify it?

FEBRUARY 16, 2024

Friday after Ash Wednesday

Matthew 9:14–15

The disciples of John approached Jesus and said, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast much, but your disciples do not fast?” Jesus answered them, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.”

Friends, in today’s Gospel, people ask Jesus why his disciples do not fast. He says that as wedding guests, they will not fast while he, the Bridegroom, is with them. But “the days will come,” he says, “when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.”

Why do we fast? Because we have a hunger for God, which is the deepest hunger. We’re meant to get access to that hunger. We’re meant to feel it so that it can direct us toward God. Every spiritual master recognizes the danger that if we allow the superficial hunger of our lives to dominate, we never reach the deepest hunger.

Thomas Merton once observed that our desires for food and drink are something like little children in their persistence and

tendency to dominate. Unless and until they are disciplined, they will skew the functions of the soul according to their purposes.

And fasting is a way of disciplining the hunger for food and drink. It is a way of quieting those desires by not responding to them immediately, so that the deepest desires emerge. Unless you fast, you might never realize how hungry you are for God.

Reflect: Why do we fast during Lent? How does this practice affect you?

FEBRUARY 17, 2024

Saturday after Ash Wednesday

Luke 5:27–32

Jesus saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the customs post. He said to him, “Follow me.” And leaving everything behind, he got up and followed him. Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were at table with them. The Pharisees and their scribes complained to his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus said to them in reply, “Those who are healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do. I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners.”

Friends, today’s Gospel tells the story of the Lord calling Levi, also known as Matthew. As Jesus was passing by, he spotted Matthew at his tax collector’s post. To be a tax collector in Jesus’ time—a Jew collaborating with Rome’s oppression of one’s own people—was to be a contemptible figure.

Jesus gazed at Matthew and simply said, “Follow me.” Did Jesus invite Matthew because the tax collector merited it? Was Jesus responding to a request from Matthew or some longing in the sinner’s heart? Certainly not. Grace, by definition, comes unbidden and without explanation.

In Caravaggio’s magnificent painting of this scene, Matthew, dressed anachronistically in sixteenth-century finery, responds to Jesus’ summons by pointing incredulously to himself and wearing a quizzical expression, as if to say, “Me? You want me?”

Just as creation is *ex nihilo*, so conversion is a new creation, a gracious remaking of a person from the nonbeing of his sin. Matthew, we are told, immediately got up and followed the Lord.

Reflect: Reflect on a time in your life when grace came to you “unbidden and without explanation.”

FEBRUARY 18, 2024

First Sunday of Lent

Mark 1:12–15

The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert, and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him.

After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.”

Friends, in today’s Gospel, Jesus goes into Galilee and begins to preach. The first words out of his mouth, as Mark reports them, serve as a sort of summary statement of his life and work: “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.”

The moment has arrived, the privileged time, the *kairos*; something that human beings have been longing for and striving after and hoping to see has appeared, and the time is now for a decision, for action. Jesus’ very first words are a wake-up call, a warning bell in the night, a summons to attention. This is not the time to be asleep, not the time to be languishing

in complacency and self-satisfaction, not the time for delaying tactics, for procrastination and second guessing.

In the Byzantine liturgy, we find the oft-repeated call to “be attentive,” and in the Buddhist tradition, there is a great emphasis placed on wakefulness. In the fiction of James Joyce, we often find that moments of spiritual insight are preceded by a great thunderclap, the cosmic alarm shocking the characters (and the reader) into wide-awakeness. The initial words of Jesus’ first sermon are a similar invitation to psychological and spiritual awareness: there is something to be seen, so open your eyes!

Reflect: What are your hopes, dreams, and longings? How does Jesus fulfill them?
