

T H E
Paschal
Mystery

Reflections for Lent and Easter

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WORD
on FIRE.

“Our paschal lamb,
Christ, has been sacrificed.”

—1 CORINTHIANS 5:7

Introduction

Friends, thank you for joining us at Word on Fire for this journey through the Lenten and Easter seasons.

During Lent, we apprentice to Jesus in his forty-day sojourn in the desert. We stubbornly stay with him, doing what he did there, facing what he faced there. The desert is the place of clarification. When we have been stripped of the relatively trivial desires that preoccupy us, we can see, with a somewhat disturbing clarity, who we essentially are and what most pressingly matters.

Blaise Pascal said that most of us spend our lives seeking *divertissements* (distractions), for we cannot bear the weight of the great questions. We play, gossip, eat and drink, and seek the most banal entertainment so that we don't have to face the truth about ourselves, the reality of death, and the demands of God. The Spirit drives holy people into the desert because it is the place where the *divertissements* disappear: "He fasted forty days and forty nights" (Matt. 4:2). At the end of the Lord's fast, the tempter arrives—because decision follows clarification. How often in Scripture the theme of decision arises. Jesus himself provokes the stark choice: "Whoever

is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters” (Matt. 12:30). And then Jesus is ready for mission; immediately after the temptations, he gathers his disciples around him and commences the ministry that will reach its culmination only on the cross.

So, this Lent, let us resolve to rid ourselves of *divertissements*, going a bit hungry and thirsty, purposely running on empty, so that the great questions may be asked with clarity. Let us get back to spiritual basics, focusing on Christ’s suffering and uniting our own suffering—through fasting, prayer, and almsgiving—with the suffering members of the Church. Let us allow the devil to come, tempting us with the love of pleasure, power, and honor—for in temptation comes decision. Pleasure, power, and honor are in themselves good, but they are not the ultimate good; they are not God. “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him” (Matt. 4:8). And in the desert with Jesus the Master, let us realize that we, too, are people on mission—because in decision comes identity.

This whole Lenten journey is meant to prepare us to embrace the Good News of Easter—the Resurrection of our Lord from the dead. In John’s magnificent account of the Resurrection, he says that it was early in the morning on the first day of the week. It was still dark—just the way it was at the beginning of time before God said, “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3). But a light was about to shine, and a new

creation was about to appear. The stone had been rolled away. What was dreamed about, what endured as a hope against hope, has become a reality. God has opened the grave of his Son, and the bonds of death have been shattered forever. The Resurrection is the clearest indication of the lordship of Jesus. It is the fulcrum on which all of Christian faith turns. And it is a breakthrough even now in the midst of history of what God intends for his creation—both spiritual and material—at the end of time.

With our eyes fixed on this coming glory of Easter, let us together enter into this desert time of self-denial, ready to break out of the darkness of sin and death and into the light of the risen Christ.

Peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert Barron". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Bishop Robert Barron

Ash Wednesday

THE SHADOW
OF DEATH

Scripture

Genesis 3:14–19

Then the LORD God said to the serpent:

“Because you have done this, you shall be banned
from all the animals
and from all the wild creatures;

On your belly shall you crawl,
and dirt shall you eat
all the days of your life.

I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;

He will strike at your head,
while you strike at his heel.”

To the woman he said:

“I will intensify the pangs of your childbearing;
in pain shall you bring forth children.

Yet your urge shall be for your husband,
and he shall be your master.”

To the man he said: “Because you listened to your wife and
ate from the tree of which I had forbidden you to eat,

“Cursed be the ground because of you!

In toil shall you eat its yield
all the days of your life.

Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to you,
as you eat of the plants of the field.

By the sweat of your face
shall you get bread to eat,
Until you return to the ground,
from which you were taken;
For you are dirt,
and to dirt you shall return.”

Reading

Bishop Barron

Homily

Nothing in this world lasts. This is a truth about our world that is hard to take in, that has to be repeated to each generation afresh, and that many older people have an easier time understanding than young people. Everything in this world eventually fades away, evanesces, turns to dust. We hold everything here below temporarily. The Psalmist says, “You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers. . . . Our years come to an end like a sigh” (Ps. 90:5–6, 9).

And listen to Qoheleth, the author of the book of Ecclesiastes: “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Eccles. 1:2). They say that the sense of the Hebrew here is air or even “bubbles.” Think of how fleeting, fragile, delicate a bubble

is—and how quickly it breaks. So is the whole of life on earth.

Qoheleth invites us to consider a successful businessman who has labored and thought and planned very successfully over many years, accumulating a great fortune. At the end of the day, he has to give away everything he's worked so hard to attain. He takes none of it with him when he dies.

I might urge you to read the book of Ecclesiastes this week. You'll see an old man, usually identified as King Solomon, rehearsing all of the things he has done, all of the goods he has acquired—and finding all of it “a chasing after wind.”

Now listen to Paul in his Letter to the Colossians: “If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col. 3:1–2). We have here the same idea: things here below are passing, insubstantial, fleeting. Hence, our attention should be elsewhere—on the things that are above, that participate in the eternity of God.

Paul goes on: “Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)” (Col. 3:5). Where do these things come from? They come from a preoccupation with wealth, pleasure, power, and honor—the goods of the world. Think about it: all of the violence, envy, warfare, and strife that we see every night on the news comes from a hyperconcern for

the passing goods here below.

In point of fact, that last word in Paul's quote gives away the game: "idolatry." This is nothing but the worship of what is less than God.

In the Gospels, Jesus tells the great parable of a rich man who has been so successful that he doesn't have space enough to store his harvest—and so he tears down his barns and builds bigger ones. So confident is he in his wealth that he says to himself, "You have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry" (Luke 12:19). But that very night, he dies—and all of it comes to naught. "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God" (Luke 12:21).

Here is something that St. Augustine said long ago: since every creature is made *ex nihilo*, it carries with it the heritage of nonbeing. There is a kind of penumbra or shadow of nothingness that haunts every finite thing. This is a rather high philosophical way of stating what all of us know in our bones. No matter how good, how beautiful a state of affairs is here below, it is destined to pass into nonbeing. That sunset that I enjoyed last night—that radiantly beautiful display—is now forever gone. It lasted only a while. That beautiful person—attractive, young, full of life, creative, joyful—will eventually age, get sick, break down, and die.

An image that always comes to mind when I think of these things is a gorgeous firework that bursts open like a

giant flower and then, in the twinkling of an eye, is gone forever. Everything is haunted by nonbeing. Everything, finally, is a firework.

But this is not meant to depress us; it is meant to redirect our attention precisely to the things that are “above,” to the eternity of God.

Reflection

Pope St. John Paul II

Homily

“Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful”
(Joel 2:13).

With this exhortation taken from the book of the prophet Joel, the Church begins her Lenten pilgrimage, the acceptable time for returning: for returning to God from whom we have turned away. This, in fact, is the meaning of the penitential journey which starts today, Ash Wednesday: to return to the Father’s house, bearing in our hearts the confession of our own guilt. The Psalmist invites us to say over and over: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions” (Ps. 51:1). With these sentiments, each of us sets out on the Lenten path, in the conviction that God the Father, who “sees in secret” (Matt. 6:4, 6, 18), goes out to meet the repentant

sinner as he returns. As in the parable of the prodigal son, he embraces him and lets him understand that, by returning home, he has regained his dignity as a son: “he was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found” (Luke 15:24). . . .

The very ancient and moving rite of ashes today opens this penitential journey. While putting ashes on the heads of the faithful, the celebrant warns each of them: “*Remember, you are dust and to dust you will return!*” (see Gen. 3:19).

These words also refer to a “return”: the return to dust. They allude to the *necessity of death* and invite us not to forget that we are merely passing through this world.

At the same time, however, the expressive image of dust calls to mind the truth about creation with an allusion to the richness of the cosmic dimension of which the human creature forms a part. Lent recalls the work of salvation, to make man aware of the fact that death, a reality he must constantly face, is nevertheless not a *primordial truth*. Actually, it did not exist at the beginning, but, as the sad consequence of sin, it “entered the world through the devil’s envy” (Wis. 2:24), becoming the common inheritance of human beings.

More than to other creatures, the words: “*Remember, you are dust and to dust you will return!*” are addressed to man, created by God in his own image and placed at the center of the universe. In reminding him that he must die, God does not abandon the initial plan, but rather confirms it and re-establishes it in an extraordinary way after the rupture

caused by original sin. This confirmation came to pass in Christ, who freely assumed the burden of sin and willingly submitted to death. The world thus became the scene of his saving Passion and death. This is the Paschal Mystery, to which the season of Lent directs us in a most special way.

Prayer

St. Francis of Assisi

“The Canticle of Brother Sun”

Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,
Yours are the praises, the glory, the honor, and all blessing.
To You alone, Most High, do they belong,
and no man is worthy to mention Your name.
Praised be You, my Lord, with all your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,
Who is the day and through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor;
and bears a likeness of You, Most High One.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
in heaven You formed them clear and precious and
beautiful.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of
weather

through which You give sustenance to Your creatures.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
through whom You light the night
and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.
Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth,
who sustains and governs us,
and who produces varied fruits with colored flowers and
herbs.
Praised be You, my Lord, through those who give pardon
for Your love
and bear infirmity and tribulation.
Blessed are those who endure in peace
for by You, Most High, they shall be crowned.
Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death,
from whom no living man can escape.
Woe to those who die in mortal sin.
Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy
will,
for the second death shall do them no harm.
Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks
and serve Him with great humility.
Amen.

Hymn

Dies Irae

Latin

*Dies irae, dies illa,
Solvat saeculum in favilla:
Teste David cum Sibylla.*

*Quantus tremor est futurus,
Quando Iudex est venturus,
Cuncta stricte discussurus!*

*Tuba, mirum spargens sonum
Per sepulcra regionum,
Coget omnes ante thronum.*

*Mors stupebit, et natura,
Cum resurget creatura,
Iudicanti responsura.*

*Liber scriptus proferetur,
In quo totum continetur,
Unde mundus iudicetur.*

English

Day of wrath and doom impending,
David's word with Sibyl's blending,
Heaven and earth in ashes ending!

O, what fear man's bosom rendeth,
When from heaven the Judge descendeth,
On whose sentence all dependeth!

Wondrous sound the trumpet flingeth,
Through earth's sepulchres it ringeth,
All before the throne it bringeth.

Death is struck, and nature quaking,
All creation is awaking,
To its Judge an answer making.

Lo! the book exactly worded,
Wherein all hath been recorded;
Thence shall judgement be awarded.

*Iudex ergo cum sedebit,
Quidquid latet, apparebit:
Nil inultum remanebit.*

*Quid sum miser tunc dicturus?
Quem patronum rogaturus,
Cum vix iustus sit securus?*

*Rex tremendae maiestatis,
Qui salvandos salvas gratis,
Salva me, fons pietatis.*

*Recordare, Iesu pie,
Quod sum causa tuae viae:
Ne me perdas illa die.*

*Quaerens me, sedisti lassus:
Redemisti Crucem passus:
Tantus labor non sit cassus.*

*Iuste Iudex ultionis,
Donum fac remissionis
Ante diem rationis.*

When the Judge his seat attaineth,
And each hidden deed arraigneth,
Nothing unavenged remaineth.

What shall I, frail man, be pleading?
Who for me be interceding,
When the just are mercy needing?

King of majesty tremendous,
Who doest free salvation send us,
Fount of pity, then befriend us!

Think, kind Jesus!— my salvation
Caused thy wondrous Incarnation;
Leave me not to reprobation.

Faint and weary thou hast sought me,
On the cross of suffering bought me;
Shall such grace be vainly brought me?

Righteous Judge! for sin's pollution
Grant thy gift of absolution,
Ere that day of retribution.

*Ingemisco, tamquam reus:
Culpa rubet vultus meus:
Supplici parce, Deus.*

*Qui Mariam absolvisti,
Et latronem exaudisti,
Mihī quoque spem dedisti.*

*Preces meae non sunt dignae:
Sed tu bonus fac benigne,
Ne perenni cremer igne.*

*Inter oves locum praesta,
Et ab haedis me sequestra,
Statuens in parte dextra.*

*Confutatis maledictis,
Flammis acribus addictis,
Voca me cum benedictis.*

*Oro supplex et acclinis,
Cor contritum quasi cinis:
Gere curam mei finis.*

Guilty, now I pour my moaning,
All my shame with anguish owning;
Spare, O God, thy suppliant groaning!

Through the sinful woman shriven,
Through the dying thief forgiven,
Thou to me a hope hast given.

Worthless are my prayers and sighing,
Yet, good Lord, in grace complying,
Rescue me from fires undying.

With thy sheep a place provide me,
From the goats afar divide me,
To thy right hand do thou guide me.

When the wicked are confounded,
Doomed to shame and woe unbounded,
Call me, with thy saints surrounded.

Low I kneel, with heart's submission,
See, like ashes my contrition!
Help me in my last condition!

*Lacrimosa dies illa,
Qua resurget ex favilla
Iudicandus homo reus:
Huic ergo parce, Deus.*

*Pie Iesu Domine,
Dona eis requiem. Amen.*

Ah! that day of tears and mourning!
From the dust of earth returning,
Man for judgment must prepare him:
Spare, O God, in mercy spare him!

Lord, all-pitying, Jesus blest,
Grant them thine eternal rest. Amen.

Reflection

Second Vatican Council

Gaudium et Spes

It is in the face of death that the riddle of human existence grows most acute. Not only is man tormented by pain and by the advancing deterioration of his body, but even more so by a dread of perpetual extinction. He rightly follows the intuition of his heart when he abhors and repudiates the utter ruin and total disappearance of his own person. He rebels against death because he bears in himself an eternal seed which cannot be reduced to sheer matter. All the endeavors of technology, though useful in the extreme, cannot calm his anxiety; for prolongation of biological life is unable to satisfy that desire for higher life which is inescapably lodged in his breast.

Although the mystery of death utterly beggars the imagination, the Church has been taught by divine revelation and firmly teaches that man has been created by God for a blissful purpose beyond the reach of earthly misery. In addition, that bodily death from which man would have been immune had he not sinned will be vanquished, according to the Christian faith, when man who was ruined by his own doing is restored to wholeness by an almighty and merciful Savior. For God has called man and still calls him so that with his entire being he might be joined to him in an endless

sharing of a divine life beyond all corruption. Christ won this victory when he rose to life, for by his death he freed man from death. Hence to every thoughtful man a solidly established faith provides the answer to his anxiety about what the future holds for him. At the same time faith gives him the power to be united in Christ with his loved ones who have already been snatched away by death; faith arouses the hope that they have found true life with God.

Poem

Gerard Manley Hopkins

“Spring and Fall”

To a young child

Márgarét, áre you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leáves, líke the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
Áh! ás the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
And yet you will weep and know why.
Now no matter, child, the name:
Sórror’s spríngs áre the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

Prayer

St. Thérèse of Lisieux

Story of a Soul Epilogue (Her Last Words)

My God, I love you!