

## *Lent: From the Symbolic to the Real*

Someone asked what I was going to do for Lent. I replied that I would have a rare steak every Friday. If that shocks anyone, let me say that I am no fan of rare beef and have a passion for any kind of fish (I am after all a Pisces!). No sacrifice there.

So I propose that any Lenten sacrifice, including the traditional “prayer, fasting and almsgiving,” must go beyond the symbolic; it must be real.

The Word of God proclaimed today uses the symbolic to lead us to the real. The temptation of Adam and Eve and the temptation of Jesus are symbolic representations of real life crises. In both cases the ones tempted are faced with the crisis of self-identity. Adam and Eve want to be something they clearly are not. The tempter in the Gospel story wants Jesus to deny who he is. Both are presented with false options that distort reality. From these symbolic stories we can come to the reality of what this Lent can really mean to us in 2020.

Coming to accept ourselves is the first step in making our Lenten observance real. For a diabetic to “give up” candy for Lent is as pointless a sacrifice as a lover of fish giving up meat on Fridays. To give up snacks during Lent because we need to lose weight trivializes Lenten sacrifice. Getting real for Lent means humbly accepting ourselves for who we really are. Lent is a perfect time for such an examination of conscience since Lent is, after all, a penitential season.

Our Lenten observances can help us maintain that perspective, if we’re honest with ourselves and don’t let the symbolic blur the reality of what Lent is calling us to. Many of the religious observances of Lent can easily become just something we do because “it’s what we do in Lent.” For example, if we choose to attend daily Mass during Lent, that daily celebration must go beyond the ritual to concrete action. It should mean that we will be ever more conscious during that day to carry out, in a more particular way, the presence of Christ into our world, at home, at work, at play in whatever we do and say that day.

If we choose to spend a portion of our days of Lent reading and reflecting on the Sacred Scriptures, especially as laid out in the daily liturgical readings, we need to connect those sacred stories to our stories. The Hebrew Scriptures during Lent relate the proclamations of the prophets and the wonderful stories of the Exodus, as well as biblical heroes like Daniel, Esther and Joseph of the many-colored coat. All of these offer wonderful connections to our own stories. In the same way, with the Gospel readings of the Lenten season we search for ways to connect our life's journey with Christ's journey to Jerusalem, recognizing that to imitate him we must come to know him more intimately on his human level.

Further, if we choose to participate in the traditional Lenten devotion of the Stations of the Cross, privately or with our parish community, we make this symbolic journey as real as possible. We can become one of the characters in the passion story by becoming Veronica and visiting a nursing home. Or by being Simon the Cyrene and carrying the cross of the poor by volunteering at a food bank or soup

kitchen. Or by being the women of Jerusalem weeping for Jesus by tutoring at your local school or PSR.

Lent offers a myriad of opportunities that can contribute to a better understanding of ourselves through a humble acceptance of our own human frailty while at the same time strengthening our relationship with God and with others. Our task is to make the connection between those Lenten rituals and our daily lives – taking them beyond the symbolic to the real.

## *Sabbath Reflections for the First Week of Lent*

Where is your story in the Sacred Story today?

Can you relate to the identity crisis in the temptations in today's readings from Genesis and Matthew?

Can you identify with any of the other characters or situations presented in today's homily?

How will you be able to make the symbolic elements of Lent be real for you?