

Bishop's Reflection, February 27th 2020

Most people know that when a marriage has lost its flame and the wind has gone out of its sails that it is time to drop everything and plan some time alone together; be it a night out, a weekend getaway or even a little vacation for two. In other words, we take the time to rekindle the love that was lost.

Scripture tells us that, when God sees that our love for him and for others begins to wane, he also arranges a time for us to withdraw into the wilderness with him. Through the prophet Hosea, he says: "I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her" (Hosea 2: 14). Long before we may see the need, or have the desire, God arranges a time and a season so that we may turn back to him, so that our hearts may be changed.

On Ash Wednesday we heard the Lord calling, "Even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing" (Joel 2: 12 – 13). Repentance involves a change of heart, a heart that is turned to God and one's neighbour. Repentance is a call of re-engagement to right relationship involving acts of charity towards others, conversation with God in prayer and a simplification of our lives. During Lent God calls us back into the wilderness, away from the many distractions, so that he may speak to us, as he once did to his people Israel.

But don't be naïve, the devil will be close behind. Just as he tested the ancient Israelites, so he tested Jesus, and so he will test us too. He cannot prevent God from wanting to draw us close to him, but he can sure thwart our desire to draw close to God. Let us heed and learn from Jesus' response to him. "One does not live on bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Mt 4: 4). There is more to life than our belly; once fed, our earthly desires will only grow. Fullness of joy belongs to the one whose heart belongs to God alone and whose ear is attentive to his Holy Will. "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." (Mt. 4: 7). By doing so, you undermine the sacred trust he has won through the blood of his Son and puts into question the love he has for us. Fullness of life belongs to the one who believes, who turns to the Lord in their time of need. "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." (Mt. 4: 10). By serving the devil, one is eternally doomed to slavery (look at the life of a tyrant, their lives are to be pitied); by serving God we are his beloved, to be loved and to love in return.

We open our hearts to God through charity, prayer and fasting -- burdens for some, occasions for pride in others; but not for the one who is drawn by God, they are the means of sweet surrender. Drawn by love, we respond with acts of love and so are intimately united to his great act of love. Drawn into communion with God, we seek a more intimate union with his Word and his Sacraments in prayer. Drawn into the wilderness by the Spirit, we are separated from our many distractions, until we realize that they are but chaff and can never satisfy our true hunger. Fasting clears away the clutter, our addictions and our dependencies, and allows us to refocus on the Lord and his Kingdom.

“Repentance” means a change of heart that is highly overdue, no longer focused on ourselves but on the splendour of God’s Holy Will. It is the beginning of true happiness, fullness of life and everlasting joy. This Lent, God draws us into the wilderness so that he may speak to our hearts once again. May we respond with willing feet and eager hearts to encounter him in true charity, prayer and fasting.