

1st Sunday Lent 2018-Homily from Msgr. Dermot Farrell, Parish Priest of Dunboyne and Bishop elect of the Ossory Diocese, who travelled with Trócaire to Sierra Leone in November 2017.

The Gospel for the first Sunday of Lent is the story of the temptation in the desert. The three temptations Jesus faced in the desert are temptations every person faces in life. Perhaps not the exact same things, but his temptations represent three classic ways that we resist the Jesus' own programme on earth as we find in the four gospels. For example, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Lk 4:18).

Having dealt with the three classic temptations, Jesus is ready for his mission. Our challenge throughout Lent is to travel with Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem. At every point in the Gospels, we are meant to identify with Jesus in his mission.

At the very heart of the Gospel are the poor. For example, in the story of the rich young man Jesus responds to his question by detailing many of the Commandments. The young man takes this in, and replies, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my childhood." So Jesus looks at and says, "Go and sell what you have and give to the poor. After then come follow me."

This teaching has its roots in the prophets who continually rail against those who are indifferent to the poor. The challenge when faced with poverty on a gigantic scale is not to get trapped in isolation and indifference or to resort to easy clichés: 'it's the government's problem', or 'they are lazy' or 'they won't work.' If you spend time with the poor, you cannot be indifferent to their plight.

This year Trocaire has chosen a family from Sierra Leone as the Lenten family. This family lives in one of the poorest countries in the world where life expectancy is just 51 years of age. The majority of children in Sierra Leone are born into poverty and 12% of children under 5, die in infancy. The adult literacy rate is 48 %, compared to a global literacy rate of more than 80 percent. The scarcity of teachers and resources makes primary education difficult to make available to all. With a GDP per capita of \$1,529, it is ranked number 14 in the top 25 poorest countries. More than 51% of the people survive on \$1.90 a day. Only 30% percent of males' complete secondary school, and 17% of females, compared to a figure of 86% in Ireland.

Deadly statistics indeed. Each of these children are flesh and blood and all are precious to God who formed them in the womb. This is a poverty that stunts growth and destroys lives. This is a poverty that incarcerates and destroys lives.

In Ireland, we have plenty of this world's material goods. This Lent you might consider adopting one family whom you can materially support. Lent is an opportunity to share the things we take for granted. In doing so, you are tightly coupling the two great commandments to love of God and love of neighbour. Lent is not just about preparing for the dying and rising of Jesus. It is also about the dying and rising of the poor and those who are held captive by grinding poverty in countries like Sierra Leone. The prayer the Church

prays for the poor does not end with prayer, but we must also work to ensure that the chains that bind poor people are broken.

Pope Francis concluded the beatification ceremony for Blessed Solanus Casey, O.F.M with these words: "I hope that the poor will always be at the centre of our communities, not only on occasions like this, but always, because they are in the heart of the Gospel, and in them we meet Jesus who speaks to us and appeals to us through their sufferings and their needs."

In God's vision we are a single family, each woman and man an image of the same God, each person a sister or brother, each cradled in Bethlehem and embraced on Calvary. The persistent question as I travel this Lent with Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem is: Do I hear their cries?

Second Sunday of Lent 2018-Homily from Fr. Vincent Stapleton, Thurles Parish and who travelled with Trócaire to Sierra Leone in November 2017.

Mount Tabor in the Holy land, is the place according to tradition, where Jesus was transfigured in the presence of Peter, James and John as we have just heard in the gospel. At the top of this high mountain, towering over the plains and valleys below, a beautiful church now stands. Having climbed on foot or chicaning up the steep mountain path by car or bus, you come to a final strait which leads to the church. On the side of that path is a crucifix with a difference. Jesus is hanging from the cross alright – but only his left hand is nailed to the beam. The other hand is free, and he is bending down to embrace St. Francis of Assisi who is standing underneath him. This is a powerful image. We can either choose to carry our cross alone or we can share the burden with others. We can either carry our cross with hope or without hope.

The life of the Koroma family of Freetown, Sierra Leone was plunged into darkness on the 14th of August 2017, when all they possessed and their very home, was carried away in the mudslide. They were lucky to escape with their lives. Some of their cousins and many neighbours were not so lucky. For their carefree and happy daughter, Kumba, a weight of darkness descended, and she became silent and passive as her family struggled to cope with grief and homelessness along with hundreds of others. Trócaire's office in Sierra Leone responded immediately, both directly and by mobilizing local partners. They began by handing out dignity-kits which contained clothing, hygiene and other essentials that are necessary for those who have lost everything. An information kiosk set up by Trócaire close to the epi-centre of the mudslide, became a rally point for the families, to obtain support, information and advice. Kumba and her family are slowly rebuilding their lives together with their community. Our efforts in Ireland this lent will have a direct impact on these families, as Trócaire supports their efforts. But their knowledge that Ireland cares has already transfigured their future from one of shadows to one of hope. They are transfigured because they know that they are not carrying their cross alone.

It is not the first major event which has brought suffering to Sierra Leone. The country only emerged from a brutal civil war in 2002. In 2014, an outbreak of the Ebola Virus in West

Africa caused the deaths of thousands of people with as many more quarantined. In the local regions, it felt like an apocalyptic event. The grief of survivors was magnified when they returned home from quarantine. Not only were many family members missing but now they felt ostracized from their communities because they were so closely associated with the plague. Their faces, bowed and sorrowful, with the grief and rejection that they have experienced are transfigured when they are recognised as human beings with dignity. Trócaire, embodied by its own dedicated staff and local partner groups, reaches out to these individuals. By relating to them with respect and compassion, they help the inner light to return to their faces. Through assistance and psycho-social counselling, Trócaire contributes to the long process of healing the soul. By reaching out to shake hands or embrace a person who has survived Ebola, we stand with St. Francis under the cross and embrace the person of Jesus.

Today's gospel provides a powerful image and blueprint for the mission of the Christian in today's world. We are each called to transfigure the darkness of sin, suffering and death with the light of Christ, and of his resurrection and his Spirit. This transfiguration was not limited to the mountain. The water too was changed to wine. The blind were restored to sight. The weak were made strong. Neither was this change limited to the earthly life of Jesus. Through the centuries, the body of Christ, his people, have been working transfiguration in the world

around them, changing hate to love, violence to peace and egoism to communion. Trócaire does not limit its work to humanitarian response in times of disaster. Trócaire is busy building up God's kingdom in ordinary communities and villages. This is done chiefly by promoting the equal dignity of women and people with special needs in response to gender-based violence and exclusion. Communities are made responsible for their manner of working. Decisions are shared among men and women. The use of material and economic means is made more transparent in response to the culture of corruption. Education for young girls is a priority. These are the seeds of long-term change.

Regardless of all the struggles of life in Sierra Leone, their prayer almost always begins with the words – "I thank the Lord ..." So let us give thanks for the warm and resilient spirit of the people of Sierra Leone who are bowed but never broken. Let us give thanks for Trócaire which acts as a leaven in Sierra Leone, raising up the people to take charge of their own destiny. Let us give thanks for the generosity of generations of Irish people. Since famine times, we have been given the gift of hearts that are transfigured into compassion by the suffering of other people. As we reach out to help Kumba, her family and the countless other people supported by Trócaire, may we, like St. Francis, feel the embrace of Jesus from the cross. May we know as we support those in need that we are indeed consoling and transfiguring the sacred heart of our divine Lord. Amen.

Third Sunday of Lent 2018-Homily from Fr. Emlyn McGinn, Trócaire Diocesan Representative for the Archdiocese of Armagh and Cookstown Parish who travelled with Trócaire to Sierra Leone in November 2017

There is the old saying; 'If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything'. Moral theologians, in particular, bemoan our own era as the time of moral relativism, a kind of anything goes morality, where nothing is absolutely right or wrong.

In this Season of Lent we are challenged to renew our efforts at prayer, fasting and almsgiving. In order to achieve these goals we need something of Christ's passion and zeal which is dramatically captured in the account of the money changers in the temple.

This Gospel account ends with Saint John the evangelist remarking that, 'he (Jesus) could tell what a man had in him'.

Jesus wants our faith to occupy centre stage in our life. It is therefore implicit that we are not held ransom to secular forces that may prevail. It is also incumbent that we don't just accept the status quo without considering how we may be agents of change.

In November 2017, I had the opportunity to travel to Sierra Leone and witness first-hand the work of Trócaire. Over the course of a week it became apparent to me that Trócaire work effectively with different local partners to bring relief and challenge the accepted norms.

In Sierra Leone we met a number of the local families left devastated by the landslide and flooding in 2017 including one family (who appear on this year's Trócaire box) who escaped the terrible fate that left 1141 declared dead or missing. We also met many of the survivors of the Ebola outbreak. Although no new cases have been reported in 2017 many families remain haunted by their loss and many survivors are plagued with medical problems, including mental health issues.

In this year, when we concentrate as a Church on the theme of family in preparation for World Meeting of Families in Ireland it was uplifting to experience Trócaire's work with a number of communities who are being helped to address gender issues, specifically gender based violence. In the

course of our discussions it was clearly highlighted that familial relationships had improved.

Perhaps one of the most damning critiques of a country which has so much potential and should be, according to the current Archbishop of Freetown, 'a donor country' because of its rich resources is the endemic level of corruption at a governmental level. This issue remains a major stumbling block which perpetuates the poverty for the vast majority.

In the midst of challenging circumstances, Trócaire carries out the most commendable support to the most vulnerable. At times, you may feel, like Jesus, at venting your anger at the transparent wrongs and incongruous behaviour but a passion to do the right thing is more productive in effecting change.

Pope Francis says the primary duty of a believer is to be the face of Christ to those in need, to show them what God is like. Trócaire, through your kindness and generosity, is the face of Christ, to some of the most vulnerable people in the world in the most difficult places to live on this planet.

Trócaire has this passion. Our willingness to provide assistance can help bring change. After all, if you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything!

Fourth Sunday of Lent 2018-Homily from Fr. Martin O'Hagan, Trócaire Diocesan Representative for the Down&Connor Diocese and Newtownards and Comber Parish, who travelled with Trócaire to Sierra Leone in November 2017.

I will never forget the kaleidoscope of colour, the intense sense of industry as we snaked our way through Freetown, all intent, all on a mission, the sounds, the haggling on the street, goods being carried precariously on heads, children coming home from school and more besides. There was a sense of ordered frenzy and yet familiar sights of the every day. We too as a small group were on a mission making our way to community of Ebola survivors, and I must say I was very apprehensive as we had seen the scale of what had happened and the impact on the country of Sierra Leone. We gradually left the frenetic and came to the place of meeting. At first the community were nowhere to be seen, just a few were present and the rest of the community were harvesting. I wondered what would happen next and hoped for their return and soon they did, one by one a representative group assembled under the embracing branches of a vibrant tree, well rooted. This was to be one of many experiences in Sierra Leone that would imprint on my memory. We sat together and the Sierra Leone partner of Trocaire spoke on our behalf. We listened to their story and all I keep remembering was the expressionless look on the faces of the people, young and slightly older, traumatised, only surviving, bereaved, isolated. I felt helpless in the midst of the telling of the story of how they as a community had lost loved ones, bread winners, providers who had shaped their lives. All I could do was reach into my experience of my own personal bereavement and what I have witnessed in Parish life. In the midst of this pain and how Ebola had decimated loved ones on so many levels, I was searching desperately for signs of hope and indeed resurrection. Suddenly a young man stepped forward and we asked him some questions about their experience of Ebola. I was impressed by his wonderful ability to express the feelings of others, to be honest he was prophet-like and had clearly reflected well on what had happened to them all, the devastation was very clear and their hopes had been dashed. What was all the more shocking was the fact that now, they as a community, were stigmatised and kept at a distance because of their association with the disease. I was horrified by this experience of rejection, as if the Ebola had already brought enough chaos. Then I thought about this man's vision and I asked about his hopes for the future and if he would work with Trocaire on other projects that would bring new life and a new beginning, and he said that he would. "You strike me" I said "as someone who has reflected well on all that has happened to you and your family and as a person who could take the lead in shaping the future". There was a clear gift here in the witness, a new opportunity to harness the hopes and dreams of a young man that could change the direction of the community along with others. My paralysis in facing the harshness of the Ebola, began to heal and give way to new life and indeed a sense of the resurrection, there was hope, there were others who cared, such as Trocaire and the Church, there were new

opportunities presented that could shape the future, healing bereavement, practical support and a challenging of perceptions and prejudice. Although this is going to take time, at least the seeds had been sown and would please God, blossom for others too. We left that day, having shaken the hands of all the villagers and I looked back through the windows of the jeep as they made their way to the harvesting on the land, and hoped for them and admired them and continue to pray for the healing and resurrection they and so many others deserve.

As we enter into the last days of Lent and prepare for that holiest of weeks, we might keep in mind that we are all "God's work of art" and that we are called to be bearers of the light, His light to those we encounter. Trocaire is one way in which that light is being experienced and I have witnessed that light through Trocaire in even more ways in the mud slide in August 2017, the slums of Freetown, the school of the deaf in Makeni and more besides. We are called to be agents of change, a resurrection people but we cannot have resurrection without the cross. May we hold on to the light, cling to Christ and sow the seeds of new life that can change the course of another, after all as a Jesuit priest told me many some time ago, "You may be the only Gospel that people will ever read".