

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT 21st FEBRUARY 2021

The rainbow is having its moment today. That promise of a relationship between God and His people.

A few months ago, as I walked towards my house there was a most wonderful rainbow in the sky. One of those moments, you must stop and look. More than that, a moment to capture and, like most people, my phone's camera is ever ready!

What made the rainbow even more noticeable for me, was the fact that the end of the rainbow seemed to dip into the chimney of my house. This was a moment not to be missed.

Later I tweeted the photo and thought to be "witty", so captioned it "There must be a crock of gold in my gaffe. St Anthony, get ready for a search request" – at least I thought it was witty! I may have been alone. My witty tweet received 36 likes, 1 retweet and 2 comments. Not exactly "viral".

The comments were interesting though: "Don't forget to share it around when you find it" was the first and maybe, just maybe that line, has a place in the Lenten Journey we begin today.

Sharing what is found! That cannot be bad, in fact in the context of charity, sharing faith, sharing hope and sharing life, it is as good as it gets. What have we found, what have you found that is worth sharing? What have we found that needs to be shared? Have you found peace of mind? Have you found a reason to hope? Have you found a reason to believe? If so, share. Share with those around you, those depending on you, those reaching out to you.

In Trócaire's world, there are so many reaching out. There are countless people depending on you to share because you have found. People hoping that there might just be that little bit extra this year, despite all we have been through, just that little bit extra to go around, to be shared because it has been found. Share kindness in thought, word and deed. Share hope at every opportunity and share good example because, chances are, you have found it in others – people you have looked to and learnt from in life.

In our gathering today, may we genuinely search for a word to share – a word of encouragement and kindness, a word of hope for another and a word that, like the rainbow in the sky, reminds us of God's relationship with us. As the bow crosses the sky, it casts its colour over all nations, over all peoples and seeks to remind all that God is with us and that we are to be with and for one another.

I mentioned two replies to the Tweet! The second one was a compliment but a challenge too. It said, "'tis yourself Fr" – I took the compliment but must also take the challenge.

Who is there to help people in need this Lent? Who can make a difference? Who has heard the word of God and the challenge of Matthew's familiar gospel about clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, visiting the sick, welcoming the stranger?

'tis yourself! 'tis us.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT 28th FEBRUARY 2021

“With God on our side who can be against us?”

My father used to tell a story about a boxer who was taking a bad beating but when he returned to his corner at the end of the first round, his trainer doused him with water, wiped his face and reassured him he was doing really well, “He never laid a glove on you”, he told the fighter. Three long minutes later, battered and bruised the fighter returns to his corner, to be told again “He never laid a glove on you, you are flying through this” – the boxer looked at his trainer and said “You’d better keep an eye on the ref!”

There are many people in the world today who must feel God is not on their side. They are hungry, living in poverty and deprived of so much of what we take as the everyday normality of our lives. Water does not flow from their taps, roofs are not over their heads, their children do not even know, never mind wear, designer names. It is estimated that nearly 750 million people live in extreme poverty with millions more living in unacceptable poverty and conditions. God could all too easily be perceived as distant from or non-existent in the lives of so many. Yet we are told that God has carved us in the Palm of His hand and is with us always to the end of time.

God is present and he wants to walk towards those hundreds of millions of people and bring to them hope, bring to them justice, bring to them a decent and meaningful existence. “I have no hands now but yours” the hymn tells us – God tells us. When people walk towards each other and work for each other in a spirit of decency, God is moving among them and stirring up something very noble in their hearts. Simply put, it is love of neighbour, it is hearing the cry of the poor and it is responding.

When God stirs hearts into action and response then wonderful and life changing events occur. God is then truly with people and the scripture passage is beyond question “With God on our side who can be against us?” Nobody – if God is truly allowed to be within us and if we allow God direct us towards the good, then nobody can be against us – nobody can be against the poor, nobody can stand idly by and watch others suffer or be deprived.

The Transfiguration, featured in today’s Gospel, did not last too long but its impact was intense. The disciples wanted to capture the moment, put a roof over it and remain in it. Jesus knew this was not where he needed them. Mountain tops and religious highs were for another day. For now, he needed them to retrace their steps, go down the mountain and meet people at ground level. It is only when you look into the eyes of another, meet them where they are, that you can truly see what is going on in their lives.

Today we remember missionaries and others who have left their homeplace to meet others at ground level. We think also of Trócaire and its staff all over the world who seek to be with people and reassure them that God is with them too and that the world is not against them. On the contrary, their presence is and remains a hope-filled reminder, that better is possible and that we are keeping our eye on the referee!

“Lord, it is wonderful for us to be here

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT – 7th MARCH 2021

“The Lord gave us Ten Commandments”, it has been said “not ten suggestions!”

Years ago, I visited the grave of President John F. Kennedy in Arlington Cemetery. It was a blistering hot day and the line of people wanting to visit the grave was long and seemed almost endless. I could hear a security guard in the distance. He was saying something repeatedly at the top of his voice, but I was not close enough to hear. Eventually, I came within hearing distance and the repeated line was “KEEP OFF THE WALL”. There was a low wall running alongside the path and people were stepping onto it. His singular task seemed to be around keeping them from doing that. “Keep off the wall”, “Keep off the wall”, he shouted at a regular interval, almost as if it were recorded. I wondered how many times, during his daily shift of duty, did he repeat this? Thousands of times I imagined, and it began to dawn on me that there was another way of doing this and getting the message across. I decided against sharing my insights with him!!

It struck me that his message was negative. It was about stopping people from doing something and, of course, he was right and under orders to do this. I thought to myself if he said “Stay on the Path”, would it not have the same result? “Stay on the path”, “Stay on the Path stay on the path”- rather than “Keep off the wall”

The commandments are around helping us stay on the path rather than keep off the wall. Of course some of them call us to avoid doing certain things, killing, stealing, coveting etc but some of them call us also to do the positive rather than just avoid the negative – “honour parents”, “keep holy the Sabbath day”, for example.

No matter how we look at them, the Commandments give us the tools to be better people. When they are ignored, as sadly they are ignored, the consequences are evident. News reports around murders, robberies, violence and more, remind us that when people ignore the commandments a heavy price is paid.

“Stay on the path” then is a call to avoid the wall from which Humpty Dumpty had such a dreadful and irreparable fall! The wall might seem to give us an advantage for the moment, but it also puts us in a dangerous place and falls are all too frequent.

Stay on the path of Lent. Stay on the path of faith. Stay on the path of decency, charity, kindness, goodness, love and peace. If only we would.

Micah in that far off prayer from another moment in Scripture asked God what he had to do to keep God on his side and live in a way pleasing to God, wondered if he had to bribe God in some way. Would it take money, part of his property, his first born son – what would God demand to ensure that Micah lived in a way pleasing to God.

The answer was around staying on the path. “Act justly; love tenderly and walk humbly with your God.”

In these lines we find the roadmap to seeing the commandments less in terms of “staying off the wall” and more in keeping with “staying on the path.” It is doable!

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT – 14th MARCH 2021

It is right and just.

We use this line in response to the celebrant's call to prayer as we enter the preface and the Liturgy of The Eucharist. "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God", he says, and the response finds its voice; "It is right and just."

Right is the opposite to wrong and just the opposite to unjust. Clearly in using both, we are veering towards the appropriate way to live life and make a difference.

Trócaire use as part of their advertising campaign, the slogan "It's not just" and, like most slogans there is a depth to it that asks us think, as some like to call it, "outside the box" – maybe we might look at one of the Trócaire messages today:

"Sarah looks at her dry, barren land and asks where her son's next meal is coming from. Sami clutches his favourite teddy as he looks at the rubble of what was once his home. Mya sees the boys in her village go to school and wonders why her daughter can't receive an education too."

There are images to with these lines, images all too familiar to us of people living in poverty, looking at scorched and unyielding land – a powerful and striking image of a little boy holding a teddy bear that has seen better days but remains his companion and another of a child clinging to a school book but no school to bring it to.

"It's not just" the campaign tells us "that the rains don't come, that Sami's home (the little boy with the teddy bear) was destroyed or that the little girl is denied an education just because she is a girl." – it's not just.

There are consequences. It's not just that the rain doesn't fall but more than that. When the rain does not fall, the land dried out and nothing can be sown or harvested and hunger, if not famine will follow. It's not just that the little boy's home was burnt down but now his family had nowhere to live and this will lead to added problems for them and nobody knows the long term effects this will have on them as family or if they can continue to be family. It's not just that the little girl cannot go to school but more than that, she will not have the chance to have an education, to learn valuable lessons and to become an effective leader in the future. It's not just everything has consequences.

At another level of course, the campaign is telling us there is a lack of justice in much of what is wrong in the poorest parts of our world. Were justice in evidence, there would be some measures put in place to provide crops and an alternative to those deprived of rain. Were justice cherished, the family whose house was burnt down would not be left unaided and those who burned their home would be called to answer for their actions. Were justice and equality a reality in some of the poorest regions of our world, a little girl would not be deprived of education.

Trócaire's campaign then, linked with the Lenten Trócaire Box is calling us to a place of recognition that all stories have consequences and that the world has lessons to learn and a contribution to make.

It's not just

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT – 21st MARCH 2021

“A pure heart create for me, O God”

That is the response to this week’s psalm. Why do we respond? What does it mean to Respond to the Responsorial Psalm? It is about keeping alert? It is about just finding a way to involve people in the Mass? Why do we respond?

Maybe this Sunday we might just look at today’s Psalm and its response.

“Have mercy on me, O God, in your kindness/In your compassion blot out my offence/O wash me more and more from my guilt/and cleanse me from my sin”

It is said that the Psalms deal with every human experience and emotion. Anger, faithlessness, despair, joy, gratitude, hope, doubt, pain, hurt all find their way into the Psalms and, at the heart of all of them is a belief that God is still there and continues to have the answer if we can find the heart in ourselves to be open to His guidance.

Today’s response is around having a “pure heart” and, if need be, it being created for us.

A pure heart is a gift. We know the value of a healthy heart and the consequences of one that isn’t. Equally a pure heart is the way to go. A pure heart leaves no room for bitterness or complacency when it comes to making life choices and having an eye for the poor and marginalised. A pure heart is one that beats gently and speaks encouragingly and prays continually. A pure heart may not be isolated from anxiety or disappointment, but it knows its Creator and calls out in the day to day living of life for God’s guidance, wisdom and understanding.

“A pure heart create from me, O God/put a steadfast spirit within me/Do not cast me away from your presence/nor deprive me of your holy spirit”

In our response to this verse, again we ask God to create that pure heart that will make us able for life, able to accept the ups and downs of each day and able make a difference. We ask for a steadfast spirit – not something fickle that goes with the latest trend but a spirit that sees beyond the hype and endures. We are asking God to keep us in His presence and to keep us rooted in a daily awareness of his presence and to achieve this, to be fully alive in our faith and response, we need the presence, we must not allow ourselves to be deprived of the Holy Spirit.

“Give me again the joy of your help/with a spirit of fervour sustain me/that I may teach transgressors your ways/and sinners may return to you”

These lines are rooted in mission. They are about having purpose and a desire to bring others along with us on the road of faith.

Someone once asked a priest “When does the Service begin?” He replied “When the Mass ends!” As we leave church today, that’s our chance to respond! That will be our chance to make a difference.

“The response to the psalm is “

YOU!

PALM SUNDAY – 28th MARCH 2021

Today's Gospel passage begins with the pouring of a scented ointment and ends with shedding of innocent blood. The journey of this week takes us from an expectant and joy-filled crowd strewing the road with palm to a shameful moment when many of those same people exchange the words "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" for "Crucify him" – a journey from welcome and acceptance to rejection and condemnation.

There are a few individuals who have come to feature in the story of these days. Some in a positive way and some, sadly, in a negative role. They are identified as individuals, nonetheless. We think of Pilate who lost his nerve and handed Jesus over for crucifixion though he found no case against him. We remember Judas who exchanged the life of Jesus for thirty silver pieces. Peter is there too, the one who said he would never deny Jesus and later fell asleep when he was most needed and woke only to deny him three times. There are other people we have come to know in the story of these days, Veronica who wiped the face of Jesus and brought gentleness when everything was hostile, and we remember Simon who was dragged from the crowd to help Jesus carry the cross. There are women named who stood at the foot of the cross – Mary Magdalene, Salome and Mary the mother of James The Younger. We hear as well of Joseph of Arimathea who saw to it that Jesus was laid to rest with dignity.

We might do well to contrast the difference between the anonymous roar of the crowd and the named actions of individuals. There is something being said about personal choices, having conviction and doing what we know to be the right thing to do rather than allowing our voices get lost in the crowd or latest trend.

We live in a time when it could be too easy to allow our own convictions to be swallowed up by popular opinion. Even if we make mistakes, if we take personal responsibility for them, we can go some way towards making amends – we think of Peter's tears, Judas' throwing the coins on the ground and Pilate making the public statement "What I have written I have written" – in all of these, the individuals named came to an awareness that better should have been done. But if we stay lost in the crowd, too easily we can justify decisions that are unjust and UnChristian. We live in a time when we are challenged to be people of personal conviction and, in the best sense of the word, influencers who encourage those around us to act justly.

On this Palm Sunday, as we remember the work of Trócaire and, for that matter, all agencies who are working for the betterment of the world's most impoverished and marginalised, we are being called to make a difference. Each man, woman and child among us, is called to find our own personal voice and response. The hope is that the voice and response will both prove helpful and meaningful in the lives of the world's poor. The prayer is that in our response, we will sing "hosanna" to the King rather than stand by, lost in the crowd, as injustice continues to hammer its torturous nails into the flesh and heavy cross of innocent people.

Finding our own voice and being truly our own person is set before us today. At days' end, may we be remembered as the ones pouring the healing ointment.

