

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Ash Wednesday 2019

Ash Wednesday, 2019

Cathedral of Mary Our Queen

Mar. 6, 2019

Introduction

A friend of mine kept putting off going to the doctor. He knew he needed to go and that further delays would endanger his health. His wife and children begged him to make an appointment as did his friends. But he resisted, first claiming that his health challenges weren't serious; then claiming he would get better on his own; and still later claiming that there was very little a doctor could do for him. Finally, just to end the nagging, he went to see his doctor. My friend hoped he'd be in-and-out in half an hour but his hopes were dashed. His physician recognized a serious condition and sent him on for tests. They resulted in the diagnosis of a life-threatening but treatable condition that required surgery, convalescence, and a change of lifestyle. Today my friend is alive and well, much happier and healthier than before.

Sound familiar? It should, because we often dread the arrival of the season of Lent just as my friend dreaded making an appointment with his doctor. Yet, if we are at all attentive to our interior life, we recognize that we need to make an appointment with the Divine Physician, Jesus, whose physical cures always signaled a deeper healing of the heart and soul. Maybe others are encouraging us to take this step, perhaps a spouse, a family member, or a friend. And like my friend who resisted going to the doctor, we offer excuses. We say to ourselves (or to others), my spiritual maladies aren't that bad. Or we say, 'I know I have problems but I can get over them on my own.' Or, 'Yes, I have problems but what can the Church do for me? It has its own problems. And like my friend who was reluctant to seek medical help, we sometimes come to church hoping to be in-and-out in less than an hour without much direct impact on the fundamental direction of our lives.

Diagnosis: The Acceptable Time

But in today's reading from the Second Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul urges you and me to go all the way. As an 'ambassador for Christ', that is, his representative, Paul implores us, as if it were God himself speaking through him: "Be reconciled to God." This is the same message that I repeat to you tonight. But you may be tempted to say to me and all the modern-day successors of St. Paul, namely, the bishops and their close co-workers the priests: "With all that has happened, who are you to tell me to be reconciled God?" Let me be clear that Paul's message - "be reconciled to God" - applies to me in my sinfulness, weakness, and fallibility as much or more than it does to you. Yet, it remains my task to convey to you today St. Paul's urgent message: Don't put it off, "be reconciled to God", this is the time to do it: "Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation."

St. Paul's prescription for reconciliation with God also requires a diagnosis of the spirit, thus dashing our hopes that our visit with the Divine Physician will be brief and painless. Like a skilled physician, Jesus will shine the light of his truth and love into the deep recesses of our mind, heart, and soul, so as to uncover in us those sins which cause us to be un-reconciled both with God and others, such as family members, friends, and colleagues. His penetrating light will reveal the enmity, self-centeredness and impurity that can lurk in hidden corners of our souls - corners we try to hide from others, even ourselves. Shining the light of his truth into our depths, the Lord will also ask us to take further steps so as to attain a sound spiritual diagnosis. He'll ask us to consult experts, namely, the inspired authors of Scripture, the saints, the great masters of the spiritual life, and a good spiritual director. If we allow him to do so, the Lord will help us examine our conscience thoroughly, in light of the Commandments and the Beatitudes. And the Lord will have us take all these steps, not because he does not know us, but rather so that we can know and see ourselves as God sees us.

And what kind of a diagnosis can we expect from the Divine Physician? He is too good to deceive us about the true condition of our heart and soul. He is too loving to allow us to presume we are in the best of health when we might be facing a spiritual condition that endangers our salvation. To our chagrin, the diagnosis may prove to be more serious than we imagined. We may find that we have a malady of the spirit that threatens our salvation yet is also treatable and curable What, then, are the next steps?

Surgery: The Sacrament of Reconciliation

The next step is to undergo spiritual “surgery” in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. When we make a sincere and unburdening confession of all our sins, Jesus, acting through the priest, excises our sins; he cuts them out; he removes them much as a skilled surgeon removes a tumor. This is not mean that we are entirely comfortable in the process; but it does mean that the forgiveness of our sins is great act of mercy. So, with St. Paul, I say again, “This is a very acceptable time” – a very acceptable time to be reconciled to God in and through the very sacrament Jesus gave us for that very purpose!

Post-Operative Treatments

Just as there is convalescence after surgery and recommended lifestyle changes, so too there is a period of spiritual convalescence after the Lord removes our sins in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. That period of convalescence is called Lent and it lasts for forty days. During that time certain post-operative treatments are indicated, namely, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. But as we saw in this evening’s Scripture readings, it makes all the difference in the world how we engage in those acts of penance. If we grudgingly pray, fast, and give alms or simply to win the praise of others, those time-tested post-operative treatments will do us no good. They are effective only when they arise from a sincere and repentant heart from which the Divine Physician has removed the threat of serious sin. That is why in today’s Gospel Jesus instructs us to give alms in secret; to pray in secret; and to fast in secret. Such penitential practices are not about proving to others how healthy we are; rather they are all about our being healed in the depths of our hearts.

And what happens when we are reconciled to God and spiritually healed? We begin to live differently. Just as my friend, on the advice of his doctor, gave up fatty foods and changed his sedentary habits, so too the person who has healed by the Divine Physician is called upon to lead a very different style of life, a life of virtue, a life of generosity, a life of patience, forgiveness, and forbearance, a life lived for God and others. Turning our lives around – conversion – is a prime task for the season of Lent and we are urged today to undertake it with all our heart and soul.

If we are willing to enter into Lent in such a wholehearted way we can expect that

when these forty days are over, we, like my friend, will be spiritually healthier and happier than we are now, and ready to celebrate, with the newly baptized, the joy of the Resurrection. May God bless us and keep us in his love!