

Sermon – Sunday 23rd February – 7th Sunday in Ordinary Time

“You must therefore be perfect just as your Heavenly Father is perfect”.

Lent starts this Wednesday and we might find ourselves asking “what am I going to do in this Season of Lent?” Will it be a time of fasting, giving money and time to those in need, spending more time in prayer and reading scripture, giving up sweets and television and putting aside my phone and social media. So, what is it that is happening in the Lenten journey? Today’s Gospel gives us that injunction to be perfect and as the Heavenly Father is perfect and then in the second reading from the Book of Leviticus we hear the words of the Lord which are “Be holy for I the Lord your God are holy”. We cannot avoid these two commands and they come in a beautiful way as we prepare for the Season of Lent. They are a call to perfection and holiness.

One might say that all sounds well and good and yes I will try better. I will endeavour to be more zealous, nicer to people and to be less self-indulgent. However, I am never going to be like those other holy and perfect people that we often meet that seem to have a gift for it, almost as if they are made for it. I could be thinking of the street cleaner that I meet on my early morning Sunday walk around Soho. He has been working from the early hours and he has been tasked with collecting all kinds of human detritus and as you can imagine, on a Sunday morning, there is a lot of it. However, he is always cheerful and greets me with a smile as he battles with the elements of his work. It could be the spouse who battles through a difficult and painful marriage but does so because of their vows that they made and their children. These people will be full of joy and smiles. Then there could be the poor parishioner that I know of who has given more than they have to those in need. The Gospel emphasises this when it talks of presenting the other cheek to be hit, if one is taken to court then one should give up both one’s tunic and cloak. Then there is the call to love your enemies and to pray for those who persecute one. As we listen to these stories of holiness and perfection, we can easily fall into the trap of comparing ourselves with others. In the second reading St Paul reminds the people that they are often favouring different characters and comparing people by definition, for instance one could be for Paul, one for Cephas or another for Apollos. What is important before anything else is to grow in our love and personal knowledge of Jesus; that is at the heart of the journey of Lent and that is why St Paul reminds us that we are before anything else by virtue of our baptism, the temple of the Holy Spirit. Christ does not want to hear of our relative success or failure for he knows about it already. He is not interested in looking at others, all he wants to do is to hold in his heart my own sinfulness, brokenness and misery. He cannot impose himself upon us but needs us to give to him all that leaves us broken by sin. He does not want us to stay where we are but literally to move on, press on and change. It is in our desire to change that he comes to live within us. St John Henry Newman said “to live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often”. This means that we must be ready to acknowledge our frailties and to give ourselves over to Him. Shrove Tuesday this week comes from that noble and ancient practice to be shroven. This comes when we go to confession, receive forgiveness of our sins and are cleansed. It is in this state that we are called to enter into the Season of Lent. Yes perhaps our spots and wrinkles do not disappear but we ask Christ to come and live deep within us which happens through the forgiveness of sins. Think of how we receive Holy Communion, of how Christ through the sacramental act penetrates and falls deep into our being. When we receive his forgiveness in confession, we are inviting him to embrace our weakness, proclivities and temptations. We are asking him to come deep within us so that we may change. In this action we are asking him to give us his grace. We have to believe that only he can change us with his grace, it is not dependent upon our effort, strength and measure of success. We must want to love him evermore so that we may know him truly as he is. This happens when he finds a home in our hearts and then we can boast not of ourselves or to compare ourselves with others but simply to boast

of Christ.

Ash Wednesday Mass times – are at 8am, 12.30pm, 1.05pm and 6pm.

God Bless.

Father Alexander

