

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
February 21, 2021 Streaming Mass
1st Sunday of Lent Year B Mk 1:12-15

Lent has begun, and the words of St. Mark's Gospel announce, "Repent, and believe in the gospel." The question is what do these words really mean for us today? Do they conjure up an image of someone walking about Times Square or a subway platform, carrying a sign and wearing a crazed look, shouting, "Repent, the end of the world is nigh." Is that what Jesus is about? Does that sound like "good news?"

The word "repent" is crucial to understanding the whole mission and ministry of Jesus. To repent means much more than to stop doing "x" or start doing "y." That may be part of it, but it's not the most important part. In the Gospel, repentance means a basic change of attitude, a change in the way we face or deal with life. Repentance involves letting go of negative ways of thinking and acting that keep us cut off from God and one another. These ways of thinking and acting can be interwoven with one another; they often masquerade as good deeds. They are deeply ingrained, and their power over us may be due to simple lethargy on our part. We have been acting that way for so long now that that is simply too much trouble to change. Or, we think we can't change. "I'm the old dog to whom you can't teach new tricks."

What might be some of those negative beliefs that influence our actions? Beatrice Bruteau, a noted writer on the spiritual life, mentions some of the following. "Health and beauty, money and power are necessary for happiness." "I am identified by my body, personality and possessions." "My welfare is more important than yours." "No one willingly gives up power." "The world is here for us to exploit." "No one can be trusted." "There have to be winners and losers." "They hurt me, so I must get even." "I can't feel good about myself unless I'm better than somebody." "Some people are supposed to dominate other people." "If everybody were good, life would be boring."

Often we are not even aware we hold these beliefs that prevent us from embracing the gospel message wholeheartedly. Our instinctive and repetitive responses to significant events reveal our hidden beliefs. We can discover those core beliefs by tracing our actions back to their source. We may shrug our shoulders at the injustices we see around us because we tell ourselves, "Life is unfair." We read about a tragedy happening to others and we respond, "Thank God it's not happening to me." We cheat someone in business because we think that if we don't have a certain amount of money, we won't be happy. Repentance gets at the very heart, the very core, of who we are and what we are all about. So, if we can recognize what is really going on inside of us, then we might better understand why we do things that we do, or why we don't do the things that we ought to do. Then we might be able to see that there is another way, there is a better way, to

engage life, than the rut we have been stuck in for all long.

Repentance involves finding and letting go of those fundamental beliefs and assumptions that compete with or contradict the gospel message. How do we "let go" of them? First, notice where these competing or contradictory beliefs come from. Some may result from the mindless interiorizing of so many of the cultural stereotypes around us. Others may be the result of one bad experience that happened to us that we have gone on to universalize for all similar experiences. Instead of allowing it to be a partial and painful piece of life, we have made it into a norm to live by. Secondly, these beliefs are not necessarily something that have been imposed upon us. Going through life we have picked them up, and we have decided to hold onto, to feed, to nurture them. We enshrine these beliefs by allowing them to dictate our moods, decisions and actions. Once we realize the origin of these beliefs that compete with the gospel message, and our own role in the continuing power they hold over us, they lose their ability to dominate our lives and eventually they drop away.

This, of course, is the work of a lifetime, but it's something we focus on doing this season of Lent. The very word itself, "Lent," gives us an insight as to its purpose. In Italian this season of the church year is called "Quaresima," deriving from "quaranta" or forty, and our now too familiar word "quarantine;" in Spanish "Cuaresma" coming from cuarenta; in French, "Careme" deriving from quarante. The English word "Lent" has another, very beautiful derivation. It comes from the Anglo-Saxon word meaning to "lengthen." Lent comes at a time when the hours of daylight are "lengthening," as spring approaches. So, is it time we too can "lengthen" spiritually, when we can stretch out and grow in the Spirit.

Lent is not just a time to voluntarily give up or do without something that we enjoy doing, as a kind of spiritual penance. Having done that may in fact just feed our ego, so that after 40 days of doing without "x, y, or z," I can pat myself on the back and say, "What a good little Catholic am I." All of us have involuntarily given up a lot of things we wanted to do the past year. It is instead a time to single out one of those core beliefs or attitudes that have been competing with or are in conflict with the gospel message, and start doing something in direct opposition, in contradiction to it. It is to act "as if" that seemingly controlling assumption of my life is not a part of who I am, or what I think I have to be, so that in time it simply falls away. It is to shed that belief and emerge a new person, like the butterfly from its cocoon. It is to enter into the rhythm of death and rebirth, into the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. For that, after all, is what Lent, is what repentance, is all about.