

L E N T (1st Sunday, A)

Before it is anything else, Lent is a liturgical season; taking up our cross is part of following Jesus; but it culminates in the wonder and joy of his resurrection, and, in anticipation, our own. That is when we are fully what God made us for.

Is it any wonder, Pope John Paul II could say: “deep amazement at the worth and dignity of the human person is another name for the Gospel”.

That dignity is both a gift and a task. “Gift”, because it is given by God and can never be taken away by anything that others or ourselves can do. And “task,” because a gift is greater when it is freely accepted and gratefully lived. Each person’s life, therefore, is the on-going story of choosing to be true to God’s purpose for us.

Failure to take that journey is failure to become our true selves – which is its own punishment. Our sins are their own punishment because by them we make ourselves less than we have been made for.

The context in which we make this journey includes the pull of good and evil, around us and within us. All religions have their various ways of coping with that reality. The first reading of today’s Mass gives us the ancient Hebrews’ picturesque story, a glimpse of what they could not fully know. But they did know sin was not willed by God.

But the story also shows that God did allow sin to happen; so it does have a place within God plan - in this way: a world in which mercy triumphs over all forms of wrong reveals a far greater love than would have a world in which nothing ever goes wrong!

If that seems too great a claim, the great paradigm for it is the seeming victory of sin, suffering and death on Good Friday. They were not merely prevented; they were allowed to do their worst. It was their success that was defeated. The terrible evils of our times are like a lot of little Good Fridays: they, too, are destined to be defeated by their success.

In the second reading St Paul reminds us that it is through union with Christ that we come to the victory of Easter joy and resurrection. So it is the meaning of Easter that needs to be foremost in our minds as we witness the seeming victories of evil. As the prophet Nehemia reminded us: “don’t be sad, rejoicing in the Lord must be your strength.”

Therefore, let’s not get stuck on the good Fridays, as some pious tendencies used to do at various times in the past. Both Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II revised the Stations of the cross, because they had finished with Jesus still in the tomb! Christian faith includes above all the resurrection.

Our extra penances and disciplines of Lent have a twofold purpose: 1) self discipline for the journey of becoming our true selves; and 2) fruitfulness for others who are to benefit from our almsgiving, charity and work for justice and peace....