

Septuagesima
February 13, 2022
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
116 Theodore Street
Scranton, PA 18508
Luke 6:17, 20-26

You noticed that we didn't just sing the Alleluia for the Gospel, and I'm wearing violet vestments; yet Ash Wednesday is still two-and-a-half weeks away. That's because we've entered the season of pre-Lent, the time during which we prepare for Lent and, if we have not done so yet, discern what fast we will undertake during the upcoming season of penitence.

Thus, it is fitting that we heard today the Beatitudes from the Gospel of St. Luke. For not only does St. Luke record what it means to be blessed, his description of all the saints and those pointed towards heaven; but he also gives us the woes, those descriptions of people on their way to perdition, those who through the sinful choices they make imperil their souls. So to help you in your discernment about fasting, I will concentrate on the woes, the aim being a holier Lent if we undertake this discernment.

Jesus first says, "*Woe to you that are rich....*" Here Jesus condemns the sin of avarice or greed, the unholy desire for the accumulation of the things of this world. He is obviously not condemning those who use their wealth to the glory of God and for the building-up of His Kingdom, but rather those who have made mammon their idol, the materialists who seek security in possessions and money rather than the generosity of God.

If this is our particular temptation, a proper discipline would be to give away what we would typically spend on ourselves. I'm not advocating going without necessities but, rather, trusting that our necessities will be provided even if we do not pad our savings. It is first the understanding that our money has been given to us to be given away and then, second, the harder part of actually parting with it.

Jesus says second, "*Woe to you who are full now....*" Here the Lord condemns gluttony, the excessive consumption of food and drink. Here we are talking about those who attempt to fill themselves up with that which is not God, or those who seek consolation in eating and drinking, not the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation, but the food which perishes.

If this is our particular temptation, then we are likely called to give up some culinary delight in which we find comfort. I know already that this will be my fast, as my year of mourning the loss of my son issued in the growth of my belly. The last time I went to the doctor, I was scolded for my weight gain. So even though I never get drunk and can't remember stuffing myself, I obviously have been overeating without even realizing it. Cutting back in my consumption will teach me to seek consolation in Him who never perishes and always fills.

Third, Jesus says, "*Woe to you who laugh now....*" Jesus does not condemn humor or having a good time, but rather he condemns levity and indifference. Levity is to treat things that are serious as if they

were not, for example, to joke about the famine in Ethiopia during the 1980s, something I distinctly remember my peers laughing about when I was in middle school. Indifference is to be willfully or even unwittingly oblivious to the sufferings of the vulnerable in our present age, to laugh off another person's trials, or to not even acknowledge contemporary trials while we eat, drink, and be merry.

If this is our particular failing, then it's time to start paying closer attention to the struggles of those around us in our immediate vicinity, as well as the atrocities detailed daily in the news media. I have made a habit of checking the headlines almost every day before I say Mass in order to avoid this pitfall. Being informed, I know about what I must pray.

Finally, Jesus says, "*Woe to you when men speak well of you....*" Clearly, He does not condemn the good works of the saints, like Cyril and Methodius, whose feast day we celebrate tomorrow, acts of charity that redound to the praise of our Father in heaven. No, the Lord here condemns our desire for flattery, manifested most grotesquely today through social media, whereby people young and old chase "likes" and "followers" to increase their public profile and stroke their ego. We can, of course, seek the praise of men in other ways, but the approval we should be seeking is God's.

If this is our particular temptation, then we might fast from the internet for the forty days of Lent. We might also learn how to practice deflection, that virtue by which we redirect compliments to others or to God, the source of every gift for which people might be inclined to praise us. We can spend less time thinking about what others think of us and more time meditating upon the day we shall have to meet Jesus face-to-face. Humility, not flattery, is how we shall prepare for that.

Hence, we see that whatever Lenten fast we adopt, the purpose is not merely self-improvement. We desire the beatific vision, which indeed we can attain precisely because Jesus has risen from the dead and wants to welcome us into our eternal abode. The aim of our fast is to pass through the narrow door that leads to heaven, to recognize and reject the wide entry way that begins the highway to hell. St. Basil said that hell cannot be made to appear attractive, so the devil makes the way there look very good. Our discernment during pre-Lenten helps us figure out how he has deceived us by making the way attractive; and our Lenten fast helps us to live more truly, that we at the Judgment may hear from "*...the Way, the Truth, and the Life, ... 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'*" And we will respond, "*We are unworthy servants. We have only done what was our duty.*"