

### **Homily Lent 3C: 3 Mar 2013: HT-W/XII-PC**

"I am no longer the pope, I'm just a pilgrim who is starting the last part of his pilgrimage on this earth." With those words Pope Benedict stepped down from the papacy last week. His remark about pilgrimage is appropriate during Lent. Throughout these forty days the metaphor of pilgrimage recurs time and again. You see, we are all of us pilgrims on an earthly journey, advancing along a path that leads to the heavenly Jerusalem. In Lent this fundamental lesson of Christian existence is reinforced. So the liturgy often refers to the great prototypical pilgrimage of the Exodus. In that venture, the chosen people traveled from the slavery of Egypt to the Promised Land. So also in the Christian Exodus we are journeying from the bondage of sin to the glorious liberty of Paradise.

The readings this Sunday repeatedly mention the theme of pilgrimage. The first two explicitly cite the Exodus. The OT selection recounts the call of Moses from the burning bush. This is where Moses receives his mission to lead Israel out of bondage and into the land of promise. The second reading recalls the negative lesson of the Exodus event and exhorts the Catholics of Corinth to learn from the mistakes of the chosen people. Those unfaithful Israelites escaped Egypt only to perish in the wilderness as punishment for their infidelity. Finally, the gospel passage is set within the context of Jesus' final fateful pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

There is one essential aspect of our Christian pilgrimage that merits study today. I speak of repentance or conversion. In the gospel, the Lord warns his audience, "If you do not repent, you will all perish!" Then he uses the parable of the barren fig tree as an illustration. The point of the story is that repentance is authenticated by bearing fruit. The problem with the fig tree was that even though it was receiving all sorts of horticultural care, it was tall and leafy and lovely to behold, still it wasn't doing what fig trees are supposed to do, namely, produce figs. This shows that repentance is meant to make us fruitful Christians, people whose faith is authenticated by the goodness they exude to their friends and neighbors. Repentance is not simply saying extra prayers. Nor is it about beating up on ourselves. It is about doing everything we can--praying, fasting, almsgiving, etc.--to let God change us for the better. Repentance is earnestly beseeching the Lord to sanctify us and make us his holy people, so that we can make God's peace and love more present in the world.

The dynamic of repentance is often described in the language of pilgrimage. The idea here is that we Catholics, through sincere repentance, are moving towards God. We're supposed to be growing, changing for the better. This conversion of heart stands at the core of discipleship. As we all know, the world around us changes, we change too: everything and everyone is in a state of constant flux. That means to remain faithful we have to be adapting to the evolving environment. It's not good enough today to be the exact same Christian we were yesterday-- if we were perfect, we would already be with the Lord! So what Christ demands of us in our youth

is different than what he asks in middle age and so also will be different his requirements in our senior years. At the outset of adulthood we discover our vocations, get married and raise, get ordained and lead parishes, etc. When we get older, we must accept the loss of youthful vigor, but also can draw on the wisdom and wealth accumulated over time to benefit others. As death approaches, we are to accept it with the serenity born of faith in the resurrection. Through it all, there are temptations that threaten to pull us off the path to Christ; and among these is the desire to stand still, to stay stuck in a comfortable spot while life and the Lord leave us behind. And so there is need for constant repentance as both a safeguard against wandering astray and a stimulus against sinful complacency.

It's with this in mind that we can better appreciate the upcoming pilgrimage to the parish of our Baptism being promoted in our local church. Our diocese is inviting us to return to the parish of our Baptism Sunday March 10. There we are to make a profession of faith. To assist with this, prayer cards w/ a profession of faith have been placed in the back. There is also an indulgence attached to the pilgrimage. To earn the indulgence, one is to receive Communion that day, get to Confession within a week or so, and say a prayer for the intentions of the Holy Father (even though we may not have a pope by then, Benedict already indicated his intentions for this month, so we're in the clear!). This indulgence takes away the temporal punishment incurred by sin. To grasp better the rationale of this pilgrimage, think of what it's like to get lost when you're driving. If you're directionally challenged like me, you retrace your steps to the starting point and then get moving in the right direction again. The Baptismal pilgrimage can be thought of in these terms. Sin involves getting disoriented and off course. This pilgrimage is about backing up to where each of us got started, at the font of Baptism in that old church where we first became Christians. In case that old church is closed or too far away, then you can get the indulgence by going to our cathedrals or any parish church in this diocese. When we return to where the journey started, it becomes easier to get our bearings and set out in the right direction again. I think that the most valuable grace of this pilgrimage may simply be to recover our identity as God's children and members of his holy Church. It's a chance to remind ourselves of this beautiful truth that we do belong to a loving God and to recommit ourselves to living as his children who are called to holiness of life.