

Dear Friends,

It was in December 1955 that Rosa Parks, an African American woman, was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white person. Her fight against racial injustice began early in her life. “Back then,” she said in an interview, “we didn’t have any civil rights. It was just a matter of survival, of existing from one day to the next.” As a child she had been afraid that her house would be burned down. She decided that it was important for her to get involved and to challenge the authorities that introduced racial segregation. Her actions resulted initially in the Montgomery bus boycott and eventually in a legal ruling that segregation on public transport was unconstitutional. Her determination not to be seen as a second-class citizen brought about massive change in society. It was not without personal cost, though, as she was arrested and lost her job. In an interview in 1992 she said, “I had not planned to get arrested. I had plenty to do without having to end up in jail. But when I had to face that decision, I didn’t hesitate to do so because I felt that we had endured that too long. The more we give in, the more we complied with that kind of treatment, the more oppressive it became.”

Today we hear of the time when Jesus spent in the desert, after being baptized. We learn that he goes on to Galilee and calls on the people to repent and believe in the Gospel. The theme here is relationship. We are creatures in relationship with our neighbors and with all living creatures, as well as with God. We hear today how Jesus tells the crowds that the kingdom of God is close at hand. The kingdom is good news for all, especially those who are poor or disadvantaged, oppressed or enslaved. It is freedom – not to hurt, but to heal, not to divide, but to bring together. The crowd listening to Jesus are invited to change direction – to create better relationships with each other, with God and with their neighbor. The kingdom is one of justice and of peace. Injustice keeps us all apart from one another; it divides us and polarizes us.

Sometimes it feels as if Lent could be a rather gloomy season, but it is also a time of blessing. It gives us time to reflect and it is a great opportunity to commit to change, to take a new direction in our lives, to make a fresh start. As Sr. Laurentia Johns writes, “From wherever we may have wandered thru neglect, poor choices, stress, busyness, God never tires of calling us back.”

In order to commit to change and to seek a different direction, we first need to be aware of what needs to change. What is pulling us in the wrong direction, and how can we turn around?

It is not that we will never make mistakes or choose the wrong path. But as Pope Benedict XVI reminds us, “Holiness does not consist in never having erred or sinned. Holiness increases the capacity for conversion, for repentance, for willingness to start again...”

Because we are creatures in relationship, this conversion – this need for change – is not an individual matter. Like Rosa Parks, if we open our eyes we can see the need for change at a community level. Where do we see poverty and injustice? Where do we hear words of hatred and condemnation towards those who are different? What is happening to the beautiful world full of exquisite living creatures that God created? It is time to raise our voices in witness to the truth of the Gospel, even at personal cost. The kingdom is at hand.

Your friend in Jesus
Msgr. Zach