

Homily - City Wide Mission

March 6-10, 2006

Closing Mass
of the City-Wide Mission 2006
at Loyola Hall, Gladstone Road, Nassau

Readings:

Ezekiel 18:21-28
Matthew 5:20-26

As we began this Lenten Mission on Monday I mentioned that we were gathered here for a purpose. Our purpose was to support and encourage and to challenge each other as we set out on our Journey of Lent.

I spoke of Lent as a Journey of Penance which leads to deepening our commitment to the Gospel. I spoke of Lent as a Journey of Love which opens our hearts to one another and draws us all closer to God.

Lent certainly is a time for us to take stock of our lives. It is a time of grace given to us to take an honest look at ourselves. It is the time to admit to the things we need to change in our lives. It is the time to commit to making the changes for the better.

This Lent is now nine days old, has it made any difference in your life? We have been here at mission each night for this entire week. Has it made any difference in your life? Those are not questions for you to answer, rather they are points to ponder as our Lenten Mission ends and our Lenten Journey continues.

Change, even change for the better, is not easy for us. In the normal course we tend to settle into a zone, a comfort zone. There we have things just as we like them. Any change is a discomfort, an inconvenience, a nuisance. I look at myself and I marvel at the ways I am changing. There was a time when you would never find me at the Mission. I might come out for the Closing Mass but other than that, count me out. But look at me now.

Two nights ago Fr. Cooper said to me with more than a hint of mischief, "Well Archbishop, you can't duck out on the Mission these days!" He is so right. For when so many of you, the faithful, gather voluntarily to celebrate

our faith, the Archbishop must take note.

- Call it the demand of the Office
- Call it the faithful leading and the leader following.
- Call it what you will.

One thing is certain the Office of Archbishop is working a change on me - making me, in many ways, a whole new Patrick Pinder. Change is not easy. But Lent is the time for us to face how we need to change for the better.

As we placed ourselves in the divine presence tonight we heard from the Gospel of Matthew. It was from that three-chapter-section of the Gospel we call the Sermon on the Mount. These 3 chapters of Matthew, 5-6-7, contain the core message of the teaching of Jesus.

Our Gospel begins with a brief warning:

**"Unless your righteousness
surpasses that of the
Scribes and the Pharisees,
you will not enter
the Kingdom of Heaven." (Mt. 5:20)**

Now the Pharisees were not a lax or loose or lazy group. They were pious and they were strict in observing the law. In fact they criticized Jesus for the company he kept. They criticized him for associating with sinners and for forgiving sins.

In their firm embrace of the law, the Pharisees lost sight of the fact that the law was not an end in itself. The law was a means to Salvation. They mastered the law to the letter. In the process they missed its spirit and purpose, perhaps altogether.

Hence, Jesus warns us:

**"Unless your righteousness
surpasses that of the
Scribes and the Pharisees
you will not enter the
Kingdom of Heaven." (Mt. 5:20)**

Shortly after that, Jesus gave us that memorable lesson about reconciliation

**"If you bring your gift to the altar
and then recall
that your brother has anything against you,
leave your gift at the altar,
go first and be reconciled with your brother
and then come and
offer your gift." (Mt. 5:23-24)**

The words and their significance are very well known to us. The point is, the Church is the home of reconciliation. We cannot embrace Word and Sacrament while refusing to pardon or even to speak with family or friend. Yet in too many instances that is the case.

The Church is the home of reconciliation. The Church is the home of the Sacrament of Reconciliation - which you will have the opportunity to celebrate in your parish during this season of Lent. Do not miss this opportunity.

The Eucharist is the great Sacrament of Unity. We heard that expressed with great force this past Wednesday. For us to accept this and to live it may mean change. In this case, though change is not very easy, it is very necessary.

Our Gospel for today is a part of a broader discourse on the kind of conduct expected of a disciple of Jesus. Jesus gives six examples, each dealing with what the law says and then with what he teaches. In each case he begins by saying: "You have heard it said" then "But I say to you...."

In the first three instances Jesus accepts the Mosaic Law but deepens it. That is the case when he says:

**"You have heard it said
You shall not kill ...
but I say to you,
whoever is angry with his brother
will be liable to judgment." (Mt. 5:21-22)**

In the second three instances Jesus altogether rejects the Mosaic Law as the

standard of conduct for his disciples. Such is the case when he says:

**"You have heard that it was said,
"an eye for an eye
and a tooth for a tooth,
but I say,
offer no resistance to
one who is evil." (Mt. 5:38-39)**

In other words, do not return evil for evil.

In speaking of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth to what is Jesus referring? He is referring to what is called the Law of Talion, the Law of Retaliation. It is found in a number of places in the Old Testament. We find it in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and in Deuteronomy. (Gen. 9:6, Ex. 21:12, 23-25, Lev. 24:17-20, Deut. 19:21)

In the Book of Leviticus it appears in this form:

**"Whoever takes the life of any human being
shall be put to death.
A life for a life.
Anyone who inflicts on injury on his neighbour
shall receive the same in return.
Limb for limb, eye for eye, tooth for tooth..." (Lev. 24:17-20)**

I mention this explicitly because in our Bahamian community today you frequently hear reference to this in support of Capital Punishment.

It is important for us to realize that the Law of Talion (an eye for any eye) was not intended to be a license to kill, rather it was intended to be a restraint on our very base desire for vengeance and revenge. Such that it should read, "If someone takes out your eye, you may only take out his eye. You don't have to, but you may only take out his eye. You may not take out his eye and cut off his head and burn his village." Restraint not licence!

Apart from that, Jesus rejects the Law of Talion as a pattern of conduct for those who would follow him. That is what he means when he said you have heard it said an eye for an eye - but I say ...

Jesus did not speak directly to many of the challenges facing us. But he

certainly addressed this issue. Why is it then that we who are so quick to think of ourselves as a Christian Nation have such great difficulty accepting this teaching of Jesus? This is a question we need to reflect on as we continue our Lenten Journey. Jesus is the healer not the hangman!

This is an area which calls for much thought, much prayer, much reflection, much reasoned discussion, much informed discussion. It touches upon the way we respect one another, the way we respect life itself, the way we seek to resolve conflicts and the way we institutionalize punishment.

I plan to return to this matter at a later time at greater length.

As we planned our Lenten Mission this year, I invited each of our speakers to reflect on the 21st Chapter of the Gospel of John. It presents both a vision and a mission for the Church between the Resurrection and the Second Coming. There is a clear reference to the Eucharist, the Sacrament we celebrate most often.

Peter, who when put to the test, denied Christ three times, is now rehabilitated - with the triple question: "Do you love me?"

Then he is given his mission, "Feed my Lambs" - "tend my sheep" and "follow me." Through Peter these instructions reach us. We are to follow the Lord. Not after our own fashion. Not at a distance. Rather we are to draw nearer. Come closer. Taste and see that the Lord is good.

As we planned this Mission I also invited our speakers to reflect on the Apostolic Letter of Pope John Paul II - *Novo Millennio Ineunte*. There the late Holy Father invites us to remember the past with gratitude, to live the present with enthusiasm and to look to the future with confidence.

How could we not share such a positive outlook when we see the marvelous leadership offered by our local priest during this mission? How could we not look to the future with confidence when we see so many young people out for the Mission this year?

We must remember also, that now is the time for us to assess our fervor and to find fresh enthusiasm for the spiritual and pastoral challenges before us. Now is the time to reflect on what the Holy Spirit has been saying to us.

As we seek to discern the message of the Spirit we note one very significant

factor. Over the past decade or more the Catholic population has been steadily increasing. At the same time the number of Priests and Religious has been steadily decreasing.

This trend has profound implications for a Eucharistic Community such as ours. It has profound effect on our pastoral planning and on our entire effort of evangelization. Still we face the future with confidence.

Like those who questioned Peter at Pentecost we too must ask, "What are we to do?" (Acts 2:37) We know that what we do must give priority to Holiness. That is to say, we must have the conviction that it is contrary to our Baptism to settle for a life of mediocrity where we make peace with vice and sins, where the least we can do is the most we will ever do. We must embrace the demand of the Sermon on the Mount to "Be perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect."

We must give priority to Prayer. Prayer must be a distinguishing mark of our life. Each parish, each mission station, each household must be a school of prayer. True prayer fashions our personality and draws us along the path of conversion.

In looking to the challenges before us we must give priority to Grace. Simply put that means realizing that without Christ we can do nothing. We must give priority to the Word of God. For, therein lies the portrait of Christ which we must see and contemplate. As St Jerome says, "ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ."

In facing the future we must give priority to Love, for without love our plans are empty and our efforts come to nothing.

Beloved, as we end our Lenten Mission, as we continue our Lenten Journey, let us pray that our local church may always be driven by a sense of mission and not bogged down in a mode of maintenance.

Let us remember that the true wealth of the Church is you, the faithful. Let us remember that in the challenges we face, the Holy Spirit is speaking to us and we ought to be listening.

Lent is a time of change and for renewal. May we be renewed this Lent and through us our entire community. For now I will end. But after we have celebrated Lent and Easter I will take up these thoughts and reflections

with you once again. In the meantime, let us remember the past with gratitude. Let us live the present with enthusiasm and let us look to the future with confidence.

Have a fruitful Lent.

God bless you all.