

1st Sunday of Lent; Year B

A newspaper cartoon pictured a large library with shelf after shelf of books. In the midst of the picture was a man seated at a table, looking at himself in a mirror; and the caption underneath read: “The little thing that puzzles him.” The cartoonist was suggesting that for all of our multiplied knowledge, symbolized by an endless collection of books, the thing we still know least about is ourselves.

Support for this suggestion can be found in the chronological development of science. The first was astronomy. When people began to search for knowledge, they started by looking at the heavens. As a consequence our oldest science is a study of the distant stars. Then came; geology, biology, sociology, and finally psychology. As a consequence our newest and possibly our least developed science is a study of the human mind and spirit. We started by studying the stars; and only after many centuries did we get around to taking a closer look at ourselves. I wonder why it is that we are so unwilling to come to grips with our own lives.

Today’s gospel reading indicates that Jesus felt no such reluctance. At the outset of his public ministry, he spent several weeks in the wilderness struggling with the big questions of who he was, why he was here, and what he would do with his life. Mark tells the story very briefly, simply saying, “He remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan.” If you and I had been there, we, of course, would not

have seen a devil with horns and a tail. What we would have seen was a young man alone with his thoughts, wrestling with himself and the real issues of life.

How should he use his power? What could he do and say that would win this world back to God? Should he give them bread? Should he try sensation and excitement? Should he strike some kind of compromise with the established powers? There in the wilderness he made some choices and commitments that would guide and sustain him in the dark and difficult days that lay ahead. He had come to grips with his own life.

Then, and only then, did he launch his ministry of saving others. His message was simple, direct, and personal: “The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.” In essence, he was calling the people to do what he; himself had done - to come to grips with their own lives.

On this first Sunday of Lent, 2018, we would do well to recognize this as the first responsibility of every person. All of us have obligations that extend far beyond the limits of our individual lives. Students have school with all of its activities and assignments. Mothers have home and children. Fathers have job and family. Young adults have career and friends. Each of us has wider circles of church, community, and civic responsibilities. And who among us does not feel some obligation for making the world a better place? But for all of these, we dare not forget that my first responsibility is me and your first responsibility is you.

Whatever else we may try to accomplish will matter little until and unless we come to grips with our own lives.

Jesus came into the world to seek, to serve, and to save a humanity that had gotten lost in the darkness of sin and selfishness. On more than one occasion, he announced that as his mission in life. But before he could take on that larger task, he first had to deal with his own personal temptations. As Mark states it, “He was tempted by Satan.” If he had failed that test, his role as savior could never have been. If his personal life had been a mess, the world would have little noted nor long remembered anything that he said or did.

So it is with you and me. It is a noble and necessary thing for each of us to be committed to social service, to helping others, to making the world a better place. But the only honest way to begin that effort is by taking charge of our own lives. The number one mission of the church is not to redeem the world, but rather to become a redeemed fellowship within the world. What rights have we to recommend our religion to others unless that religion produces some consequences within our own lives that make it worthy of recommendation?

In his first letter to the Corinthian, the Apostle Paul spoke of his deep commitment to evangelization. He summarized it by saying, “I have made myself all things to all men in order to save at least some of them.” Then he closes the paragraph with this highly significant sentence: “I discipline my own body and master it, for fear that having preached to

others I, myself, should be rejected.” Paul was a man who, like his Lord, knew the necessity of coming to grips with his own life.

There is no amount of social concern and commitment that can relieve you and me of that same necessity. My first responsibility as a priest is not to administer the sacraments, or serve the church, or evangelize the world. My first responsibility is to allow God to work in my life so that I become, by his grace, a whole and healthy person whose daily living lends some credibility to the gospel that I profess and proclaim. Your first responsibility as a mother is not education of children. It is rather to become the kind of Christian woman whose personal life gives some evidence of the indwelling presence of the living Christ. Your first responsibility as a father is not to provide for your family, but to become a real man whose very life requires respect.

We could go on, speaking of the aged, the child, the youth, and the young adult. Let us simply summarize by saying, the first responsibility of every one of us is to come to grips with his or her own life.

Next, we need to know that it makes a difference, a significant difference, what each of us does in this regard. Someone here may be thinking that your life is so small and your influence is so limited that it really doesn't matter what you do with it. And that reaction is certainly understandable. We are surrounded every day by great events that make our individual lives seem rather trivial.

But let me point out that whether or not you come to grips with your own life makes all the difference in the world, at least to you. No other event on earth is as important to you as this. Even in bad times we can do fairly well if we know how to deal with ourselves; but there is no such thing as good times for that man or woman whose personal life is out of control. Here, let us say, is a man who has all the money he could possibly want or need; but he is caught in a web of alcoholism. For that man, the only thing that really counts is sobriety. Unless he can find some way to come to grips with his own life, he is finished; and all of the money in the world cannot save him. Or let us suppose the world were at peace, but your own inner life was filled with hatred. The world at peace, for all practical purposes, would be lost on you, because the conflict would be on the inside. Wherever you were, you would go to bed at night and get up in the morning in the midst of a war zone. You see, for you and me, it matters whether or not we come to grips with our own lives.

It also makes a difference to the world - at least to some people in the world. You know who those people are. It may be a father and a mother. It may be a wife or husband and children. It may be friends. But there are at least a few people in this world today for which you are a critical consideration. What you do with yourself matters more to them than almost any other issue on earth. We all know people like that; and I am

saying that for their sakes each of us should come to grips with his or her own life.

Let me close by saying that doing of this will call for a great deal of personal resolve, but personal resolve alone will not be enough. The danger with a sermon like this is that someone may think that we are urging people to lift themselves by their own bootstraps. And that, of course, would be an exercise in futility. Even Jesus could not do that. He won his struggle in the wilderness, but he did not accomplish that victory in his own strength alone. Our reading tells us that “angels ministered to him.”

Whatever else that means, it means at least this: In his struggle with Satan, Jesus had an awareness of divine help. He did not fight that battle alone. His Father was there, and together they gained the victory.

That same support is available to you and me. God is with us, just as surely as he was with Jesus in the wilderness. All we need to do is cultivate an awareness of his presence and learn to depend upon him. Then, and only then, we will find the strength to come to grips with our own lives. **Amen.**