

Trocaire Lenten Homilies 2022

by

Nóirin Lynch, Director of the FCJ Spirituality House - Teach Spiorodálta, Spanish Point.

First Luke 4: 1-13

Welcome to the season of Lent, to a time of stripping back what isn't important and remembering who we are and what is at the heart of this one precious life we have each been given. Today's readings invite us to let go of distractions, or temptations, and to recognise God who is present with us on our journey.

In today's first reading, Moses reminds his people that they came from poverty (wandering Arameans!), that they knew what it was to gain, then lose everything, and to become slaves. Reminding them that they were now brought into a land of milk and honey, he invites them to bow down in God's presence and give thanks. After two years of Covid, many of us have made challenging journeys too, and we are changed by the experience. Can we take some time this Lent to notice where God has been with us on the journey? Are there wounds to heal, or 'thank-yous' to say as we prepare for Easter?

Every Lent Trocaire shares with us all, the story of one family and they invite us to see the world through their eyes. This year we meet Thandekile. Thandekile is a thirty-one-year-old Zimbabwean mother of two children. Her daughter's name is Nomatter and she is aged eleven, and her son's name is Forward and he is aged eight. In November 2020, the family's already fragile world was turned upside down when Covid-19 hit. Thandekile's husband, Donovan (35), died from Covid-19 while working in South Africa to earn an income to provide for his family. Left widowed, now Thandekile's greatest fear is that she will die from Covid-19 and there will be no one to look after her children.

We are invited to consider the reality of life for many through the prism of this family's story this Lent. Where is God for this family? Where is God calling us to be for them?

The psalm response to our reading is the beautiful: 'Be with me Lord when I am in trouble, Be with me Lord I pray'. During Covid, all of us struggled. Some may have found it difficult to ask for help or admit our need of support, and this simple prayer has often been all a person could utter as they waited outside a hospital or managed without paid work or cared for their sick family at home. 'Be with us Lord, when we are in trouble'. Community and families were magnificent at being Christ's hands and feet for all in need, and we give thanks for all who cared for us in these times. *For Thandekile too it is not easy to ask for help, but she knows she needs support to take care of her children. Not handouts, but enough support that she can help herself. Thandekile says "The Lord's Prayer gives me courage, hope and strength in tough situations." May our prayers and support be added to God's grace.*

May we all find the courage not to give into the temptations of despair but to recognise the love of God in all who carry us, the kindness of God in all who include us and the justice of God in all who feed, clothe and love us. May we all take seriously the Benedictine prayer: "Dear God, give bread to those who are hungry, and a hunger and thirst for justice to those who have plenty. Amen."

Second

Luke 13: 31-35 OR Luke 9: 28-36, 37-43a

Certain moments change our lives. Whether through sadness or joy, we get an insight into what matters in a way that we can never un-see. Perhaps a birth, a heartbreak or moment of love. We are transformed and cannot return to not knowing what we have experienced.

On that mountainside as Peter, John and James watched Jesus' transfiguration revealing to them who He was, the apostles knew that they would never see him in the same way again. Their friendship was transformed, and so were they. Unsure how to respond, they searched around looking for things to do to honour the moment - 'let's make tents' they thought!! - but a cloud descended stilling them and they heard a much greater challenge: 'Listen to him'.

Often in moments of great joy or sadness we find ourselves so busy trying to respond, that we can't or don't take the time to be really present to what's happening. Afterwards we wish we had put down the phone or let ourselves grieve. Sometimes it is only when we are alone or in a quiet place that we can allow ourselves to feel all that happened and hear our hearts response to such precious moments. Like the apostles a cloud, or a moment of quiet, stills us and invites us to listen. Listen to what has happened, allow the moment to be experienced.

In the stillness we are with God and God is with us.

When we think of our Trocaire family in Zimbabwe this year, we think of Thandekile, Nomatter and Forward. Let us also remember David, father and husband, who was away from his family working when he died of Covid suddenly. Many of us here understand the grief of not being able to be with the one we love when they were sick or died with Covid, so we pray for them all. We also see how life changed utterly for the family and how Thandekile - almost bedbound with grief - found the energy to get up and provide for her beloved children, to worry for their future, to create - in partnership with Trocaire's friend Caritas Bulawayo - new sources of income and of hope. Thandekile speaks of her trust in God through this time, of the support of those who could help her.

In the times when we are transformed, we also can come to know Jesus in a new and deeper way. Like any deep friendship or marriage, life experiences can peel away platitudes to reveal a deeper commitment. So too, moments of transformation can help us to come to know God with us in a new way.

We can find ourselves praying with the psalmist in joy or in pain: 'The Lord is my light and my salvation'. And hear the invitation to be still and listen, for God's love is always near.

Third

Luke 13: 1-9

Pilgrimages are a wonderful thing. There's something inspiring and nourishing about leaving our routine and going to a 'holy place' to experience God. It carries us. We often come home with clearer thoughts, plans and inspiration - like a person with a new gym regime, or a well pruned tree ready to blossom. When God spoke to Moses in the first reading today though, he didn't bring Moses up a mountain or on a long journey. God met Moses where he was and told him that here - this place, this earth, this time - was holy. 'Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground'. In that very ordinary moment, in that very ordinary time, God laid out for Moses a plan that would change the world.

Many of us have led quiet, challenging or difficult lives in these past years. Some were able to use the time to rest, renovate, plan or study. Many though, struggled to be safe, to pay bills, to be healthy or ambitious. There might be a thought out there that we must emerge now with loads of energy and a plan, whereas many are in recovery or are still surviving not thriving. Today's readings remind us that God is interested in the ordinary, not spectacular, that God meets us as we are, where we are. The psalmist sings 'The Lord is kind and merciful, redeems your life from destruction, crowns you with kindness and compassion.' If you've been struggling, I hope you can hear this love God has for you – just as you are now.

The image of the pruned fig tree can be frightening and make people feel judged or wronged. In fact, any gardener will tell you that a pruning of a tree is a kindness, to allow it to grow healthily and better next year. Much like a decision to get healthier, to declutter or to meet up with friends we haven't seen in a while, pruning is meant to encourage and bring out the best in us. Martina Lehane Sheehan in her book, 'Trellis for the Soul', speaks of how her wild roses bloomed with a little structure - they didn't need to be controlled but they blossomed with support.

Here in this moment, is there one small thing you can do to help yourself have a healthier or happier life? A treat, a meditation, a visit to a friend? This Lent, is there one thing you can do to help yourself have a deeper, kinder friendship with your God? 5 mins of prayer in the morning, a thanksgiving walk in nature, signing up to a course you've always wanted to do? Every created thing has purpose and is part of this beautiful universe created by God, for a reason. We are not at our best as a people, until everyone and everything is free, safe and flourishing together.

As we think of Thandekile, Nomatter and Forward this week, we think of Moses pressing his face into the African soil and recognising God present with him. We remember that God wants every person created to have the possibility of good health and a good life. There is some unique purpose for every person in Thandekiles community, state and country, and we are in a position to contribute to the pruning and upbuilding of these communities by supporting education, access to clean water and support of local enterprise. May we too take off our shoes and recognise that we stand on holy ground when we stand for the dignity and values of every person.

Fourth

Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

This week we hear the well-known story of 2 brothers struggling to live their best lives. One thinks the best way is to stay home and build up the family, the other feels called to leave. One returns broken to ask for forgiveness, the other is horrified that his safe choices are not more highly valued than his brothers. 'Everything I have is yours' becomes a sentence of inclusion and exclusion, depending on how you hear it in this story, doesn't it!

One of the gifts and challenges of the pandemic is the realisation that no matter how wealthy or cocooned you think you are, life intrudes and we need each other. The younger brother needed a family to come back to. His older brother needed to learn that he was not loved *because* he stayed, but was loved because his father loved him. As we emerge from lockdowns and pandemics we will hear many speak of who deserves what, of who stayed, of who saved, of who suffered and of who were broken. We might be tempted to make these distinctions into reasons to love people more or less. God makes no such distinctions. Our calling as believers is to love all without counting the cost, to feed the hungry without asking if they are worthy, to create a just world without worrying about how that might be abused. Our calling is to build the Kingdom of God - heaven - on earth because that is what God wants.

In today's first reading we see that God gave the people Manna in the desert for as long as they needed it, and when they could live from the land, it stopped. Now it was up to the community to care for, and feed, one another. We who have been carried in these past years - and we all in western Europe have been carried - have a calling now not to retreat from need but to be Christ's hands and feet for all.

Thandekile, Nomatter, Forward and her community remind us this Lent that the pandemic is far from over for most. We have a Christian responsibility not only to take care of ourselves but to reach out to all. Archbishop Farrell (Dublin) reminds us:

'God now calls us, individually and collectively, to work for the good of the planet and the good of all. All too often "religion" appears as if it is no more than an intellectual failure of nerve. However, true religion is not a flight from the world: faith that is alive provides a framework for people to make decisions and take action. As a church, and as a society, we need to reflect with greater depth, urgency, and seriousness about what we must do about climate change. If not for your own sake, then for the sake of your children, and for the world's children – take action.'

People in Zimbabwe were already facing a daily struggle to provide food, water and education for their families and facing droughts due to climate change, but the Covid-19 pandemic has made this struggle even harder. Now is not the time to close the door, but to remember the words of the father to both his sons, 'Everything I have is yours'.

May we celebrate our healing on this planet by honouring and respecting all God has made.

Fifth

John 8: 1-11

“Let anyone who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

We live in a world that often forgets to love people and use things. Instead many of us – consciously or unconsciously - use people and love things and people get hurt in the process.

We live in a world that sometimes teaches girls and women that they are not as valuable and important as boys and men; that their inherent dignity is dependent on others opinions.

We live in a world that sometimes teaches boys that the worst insult is to be called a girl or girly, that a man’s feelings are his weakness, that controlling or hurting others for fun is a sign of power. I know that this is not the world any of us here want for our children, for our community. We want to live in a world that does not use or hurt people. Heaven.

Some people suggest that this is not a topic for church. Yet our Gospel - the Word of God today - speaks of a woman caught in adultery who was to be killed by pounding her body with stones until she died, and no one thought that inappropriate. God speaks very clearly today to us when he says that no man has the moral authority to hit a woman, not even his partner, not even one clearly caught breaking a moral law. It is important we say this out loud, so there is no fear or doubt.

Today's first reading speaks of how God brought his people out of slavery into hope. And the psalmist's response is to sing 'The Lord has done great things for us: we are filled with joy'. We are always learning, and as we learn how to respect each person, we might return to the first reading for consolation. All of us have much to learn but as Christians we have the joy of knowing that it's not impossible to become a kinder and better person. The Lord says this:

“I put water in the desert and rivers in the wasteland for my chosen people to drink, the people whom I formed for myself, that they might announce my praise.”

Trocaire's work in partnership with Caritas Bulwayo, in Zimbabwe has, since 1980, supported families and community by working for human rights, against gender based violence, for food security and to combat climate change emergencies. In offering many women the opportunity to develop small businesses, they support many families to achieve their full potential and joyful life. We continue to learn from the people of Zimbabwe this week, inspired by their courage and faithfulness.

Sixth Passion/Palm Sunday

Luke 22 or 23

Today's celebration of Eucharist has a number of Gospel accounts as we enter into Holy Week. Some parishes will have a procession into the church with a reading of Luke 19 to remind us that we too are starting a journey with Jesus this week, palms in hand. Others will focus on Luke 22 or 23, each a longer than usual reading of Jesus' suffering, condemnation, passion and death. Sometimes we are so sure we know the story that we miss it entirely, but each offers an insight from God to you, to chew over in the week ahead. Listen, all who have ears!

The first Gospel of today is the beautiful simple story of the apostles preparing for, and Jesus entering into, Jerusalem. It was a simple moment. People who loved him and his message came out to praise him. Politics was to come but for that moment, people literally spread their cloaks on the road for Jesus to make a beautiful path for him. Others gathered palms to wave to show their love. They sang and danced and it upset some officials, who were nervous of the message and the man. This is how Holy Week begins - with joy!

And here are my questions for you on this Palm Sunday.

- Is there anyone so important in your life that you would spread your clothing, your wealth or your good name out on the ground to honour them? Have you told them this?
- As a follower of Jesus, what of the Good News do you think is so important that you would publicly declare it by waving palms and dancing? Good news for the poor? Welcome for migrants? Justice for all? Debt cancellation? Freedom from sin and oppression? Would you stand and dance for these things that matter to God, or will you watch from behind closed doors as the story unfolds this week? For this is your story too!

This week you are not invited to listen to a story that happened 2000 years ago in the Middle East. You are invited to participate with your life. At any moment of this week, we cannot be observers. We are called to ask ourselves – where am I now, how am I held back or freed to love and stand with Jesus, what can I learn for my life here?

- On Palm Sunday we might ask: As I take home blessed palm and place it in a visible part of my home, what Jesus-value matters so much to me that when I see this palm, I will remember my commitment to stand for it?
- On Wednesday I might ask: How am I caught up in worries and not trusting God's plan, when in fact God's plan is already underway? What can I bring in prayer this Holy Week?
- On Thursday - Who is welcome at my table and how do they know they are welcome? How welcome is Jesus into my life really – will I let him wash my feet, know my hurts and hopes, heal my heart?
- On Friday - Have I truly experienced the absence of God? The desolation and loneliness of heartbreak or despair? Looking back over the past year can I see places I neglected God or felt abandoned by my God and how can I pray about this now, honestly and bravely?
- On Saturday - How have I dealt with waiting, especially over the past year. Where have I spent that waiting time with God and what have I learnt about myself, my people and my God in the quiet? If I am afraid of the quiet of waiting, how can God help me now?
- On Sunday - Am I interested in resurrection? Am I open to all things being healed and made alive again? Am I willing to do the work of Jesus, which will restore hope where there was despair and life where there was death? Do I recognise that I am always, always beloved and precious in God's eyes and that nothing can come between me and the love of God, made visible in Jesus Christ. Nothing. Nothing.

Join the story, journey with us. We each are invite to wave palms and sing now as we start the journey of Hope, of Holy Week.