



LENTEN
GOSPEL
REFLECTIONS

YEAR A

BISHOP ROBERT BARRON



WORD ON FIRE CATHOLIC MINISTRIES

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome as we journey together toward the great feast of Easter!

For many people, the big feast of the year is Christmas, but for Christians, the truly great feast is Easter. Without Easter, without the Resurrection, we would not have the gift of salvation. Jesus had to rise from the dead or else he would have just been another failed Messiah and his birth would be a forgotten footnote of history.

That's why Lent is such an important time of year for us. It is the period during which we refocus on the passion and death of Jesus so that we will be ready to embrace the good news of the Resurrection at Easter.

So, as we begin with Ash Wednesday and its reminder of repentance, let us resolve to do our best each day, knowing that it is not the destination, but the journey that will ultimately transform us.

Peace,

Bishop Robert Barron

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Asb Wednesday

MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-18

Friends, today's Gospel at the beginning of Lent asks us to do three things: pray, fast, and give alms. Let's focus today on prayer. Studies show that prayer is a very common, very popular activity. Even those who profess no belief in God pray!

What is prayer, and how should we pray? Prayer is intimate communion and conversation with God. Judging from Jesus' own life, prayer is something that we ought to do often, especially at key moments of our lives.

Well, how should we pray? What does it look like? You have to pray with faith, and according to Jesus' model, you have to pray with forgiveness. The efficacy of prayer seems to depend on the reconciliation of differences.

You also have to pray with persistence. One reason that we don't receive what we want through prayer is that we give up too easily. Augustine said that God sometimes delays in giving us what we want because he wants our hearts to expand.

Finally, we have to pray in Jesus' name. In doing so we are relying on his influence with the Father, trusting that the Father will listen to him.



First Thursday of Lent

LUKE 9:22-25

Friends, our Gospel today lays out Jesus' conditions for discipleship. For all of us sinners, to varying degrees, our own lives have become god. That is to say, we see the universe turning around our ego, our needs, our projects, our plans, and our likes and dislikes. True conversion—the *metanoia* that Jesus talks about—is so much more than moral reform, though it includes that. It has to do with a complete shift in consciousness, a whole new way of looking at one's life.

Jesus offered a teaching that must have been gut-wrenching to his first century audience: "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." His listeners knew what the cross meant: a death in utter agony, nakedness, and humiliation. They didn't think of the cross automatically in religious terms, as we do. They knew it in all of its awful power.

Unless you crucify your ego, you cannot be my follower, Jesus says. This move—this terrible move—has to be the foundation of the spiritual life.



First Friday of Lent

MATTHEW 9:14-15

Friends, in today's Gospel, disciples of John the Baptist wonder why Jesus and his disciples do not fast as John and his disciples do. It is true that, by comparison, Jesus had a freer, more worldly, less obviously "religious" style. He didn't sequester himself like the Essenes; he didn't insist on ritual and legal purity like the Pharisees; and, it seems, he didn't fast and live a life of austerity like John and his followers.

And so they ask why he doesn't encourage fasting among his followers. Jesus' answer is wonderful: "How can the guests at a wedding fast while the groom is still with them?"

Could you imagine people fasting at a wedding banquet? Could you imagine going into an elegant room with your fellow guests and being served bread and water? It would be ridiculous!

This great image of the wedding feast comes up frequently in the New Testament, most obviously in the wedding feast at Cana narrative.

That's because Jesus is, in himself, the wedding of heaven and earth, the marriage of divinity and humanity; he is

the bridegroom and the Church is the bride. In him, the most intimate union is achieved between God and the world.



First Saturday of Lent

LUKE 5:27-32

Friends, our Gospel for today is the simple but magnificent story of the conversion of Matthew, called Levi by Luke. I urge you to read it in Luke 5:27-32 and meditate upon it this week, for it's about you.

There is a splendid painting of this scene by the late Renaissance artist Caravaggio. Matthew sits at his tax collector booth in all of the finery of sixteenth-century Italy. He is surrounded by his wealthy friends and by all of the paraphernalia of tax collecting. Across from him stands the Lord, wrapped in shadow. He stretches out his hand toward Matthew, as a shaft of light falls on the tax collector's table. It calls to mind the hand of God from Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling, suggesting that conversion is like a new creation.

Matthew points his finger at his own chest and looks incredulously at Jesus, as if to say, "you're calling me? The likes of me?" Yes! Jesus calls whom he wills, and Paul tells us in his letter to Timothy that he wants all people to be saved. Even those of us who feel a million miles from him, perhaps sunk in a lifestyle that has alienated us from God, God calls us, just as he did that first-century tax collector.



First Sunday of Lent

MATTHEW 4:1-11

Friends, our Gospel for the first Sunday of Lent is the story of the temptation in the desert. At every point in the Gospels, we are meant to identify with Jesus. Jesus has just been baptized; he has just learned his deepest identity and mission. And now he confronts—as we all must—the great temptations. What precisely is entailed in being the beloved Son of God?

First, the tempter urges him to use his divine power to satisfy his bodily desires, which Jesus dismisses with a word. Having failed at his first attempt, the devil plays a subtler game—the temptation faced by Adam and Eve in the garden, to pretend to be God.

And then, last and perhaps greatest of the temptations, power. Power is extremely seductive. Many would gladly eschew material things or attention or fame in order to get it. But Jesus' great answer in Matthew's account is, "Get away Satan!" To seek power is to serve Satan—that's the blunt point of Jesus' response.



First Monday of Lent

MATTHEW 25:31-46

Friends, our Gospel today is the scene of the Last Judgment. We hear that the specifics are a matter of love concretely expressed: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.” And we know the famous connection that Jesus makes: “... whatever you did for one of the least brothers of mine, you did for me.”

There is something awful about the specificity of these demands. This is not love in the abstract, having affection for “humanity.” It is caring for *that person* who is homeless, for *that person* who is ill, for *that person* who is in prison.

We do not take our money, our social status, our worldly power, into the next world; but we do take the quality of our love. You might consider doing an examination of conscience at the end of each day, and use as your criterion this passage. Perhaps put it up on your wall or post it next to your bed so that you see it before you go to sleep.



First Tuesday of Lent

MATTHEW 6:7-15

Friends, the Gospel for today is of great moment, for in it the Son of God teaches us to pray. Our teacher is not just a guru, a spiritual sage, or a religious genius, but the Son of God. This is why the Our Father is the model of all prayer.

A desire to pray is planted deep within us, the desire to speak to God and to listen to him. We can forget to pray, neglect to pray, become lazy in prayer, but we can never really lose the desire to pray.

And so let us attend carefully to the first words of Jesus’ great prayer: “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” Our basic problem is getting our priorities mixed up. We seek all kinds of worldly things—money, pleasure, power, honor—all of which are unsatisfying.

What we should desire, first, is God. This is precisely what the prayer to hallow the name of God is all about. It’s not that God’s name isn’t in fact hallowed, but we’re praying that we might keep it that way, that we might honor God in all things. We’re praying for a radical reorientation of our consciousness.