

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today's readings are a wonderful foundation for reflection as we enter in the holy season of Lent on Wednesday, Ash Wednesday. Lent is a time when the Church invites us to enter the profound mystery of God's redemptive love for us. It is also a time of reflection and introspection. The words of Sirach posited in the first reading offers an excellent image of the renewal that is possible when we enter generously into the Lenten experience: "As the test of what the potter molds is in the furnace, so in tribulation is the test of the just." Lent is a time of purification, of being conformed more closely to the heart of Jesus Christ. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church expresses, "For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sinning." [Hebrews 4:15]. By the solemn forty days of Lent the Church unites herself each year to the mystery of Jesus in the desert."

St. Paul reminds us in his Letter to the Corinthians that death has neither victory nor sting over those who remain faith-filled companions of Jesus. This reality has been made powerfully manifest over these past weeks as I have accompanied a family as a loved one journeyed from this earthly life to the promise of eternal life. I had the privilege of anointing a friend at Stanford Hospital who had been sick for a very short time yet was succumbing to aggressive cancer. As I anointed my friend, who was joined by his wife and one of his sons, I was struck by his serene demeanor. He had made peace with God's will. He was surrendering himself totally to God, not out of a sense of defeat and agony but rather as a response of love, gratitude, and thanksgiving for all the many blessings God had imparted upon him in life. At one point my friend said he wanted to go home. His doctor responded, "Oh, back to San Mateo?" My friend retorted, "No, I want to go home to the Lord." This sentiment expressed by my friend reveals a deep and abiding relationship with Jesus, a genuine and authentic understanding of the Lenten journey. It is a pilgrimage of surrender, of the desire to conform ourselves to the freedom to be who the Lord has authentically called us to be: people of gratitude, of integrity, of self-emptying in order to be filled with God's grace, God's image.

Luke's Gospel offers some challenging yet liberating reflections for us as well. For whatever reason, it is easy for human beings to be arrogant or presume to be superior to others. Jesus warns his disciples that "No disciple is superior to the teacher; but when fully trained, every disciple will be like his teacher." This is the call of authentic Christian maturity and discipleship: to learn at the feet of the Master, Jesus the Good Shepherd, and to communicate that learning to others. When we try our best to emulate the humility, modesty and generous capacity to forgive like Jesus, it makes it much easier for us to be less judgmental, hypocritical and superior to others.

May we, as we enter this holy season in the desert, renew in ourselves the desire to be good persons who, within the store of that very goodness, have hearts that produce good, the fruits of which are thanksgiving, gratitude, forgiveness, reconciliation, humility, and generosity. May God bless you abundantly with His love and His grace.