



ST. STEPHEN'S
ANGLICAN CHURCH
11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Sunday February 11th - Quinquagesima Sunday

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.**

The passage selected for the sermon this morning is taken from the Gospel:

“a certain blind man sat by the way-side begging: and hearing the multitude pass by, he asked what it meant. And they told him, that Jesus of Nazareth passeth by. And he cried, saying, Jesus, thou son of David, have mercy on me. And they which went before rebuked him, that he should hold his peace: but he cried so much the more, Thou son of David, have mercy on me.”

St Luke 18:35-38

We are closing out the season of Pre-Lent. This Wednesday, we will receive ashes on our foreheads as the symbol of the beginning of our Penitential season, which culminates with the memorial of our Lord's crucifixion on Good Friday.

It may seem to our sensibilities, that these two readings are off message as we launch into a season of contrition and sacrifice. We start with the familiar reading from Corinthians that proclaims the greatest of the Cardinal virtues as charity. In our modern culture, this passage is often read as part of the marriage service, with the alternate use of the word love

instead of charity. However, we should be aware that in this reading, the faithful interpretation of the passage is not romantic love, but should be read strictly as a synonym for charity.

The Gospel that follows relates this glorious miracle performed by Jesus for the blind man on the road to Jericho. That passage ends with the crowd who witnessed the miracle following the lead of the newly sighted man in glorifying and praising God. Not exactly the sentiment that prepares us for the humility and solemnity of Ash Wednesday.

And yet, these readings are not only appropriate, but critical to our preparation for a Holy Lent. The tradition of “giving up” our material comforts for Lent is a meaningful and appropriate reflection of our need to be separated from the temptations of this world as we prepare to honor the sacrifice that opened the world to come to us, who are unworthy and sinful. And yet, giving up chocolate or alcohol or video games, fasting on Fridays, and following the Stations of the Cross can only be the start of our Lenten duty.

There is value in the sacrifices we make, but without the complementary commitment that Jesus requires of us, these practices can bring us to the cross more vulnerable than prepared. If that sounds like a radical interpretation of Lenten piety, we need only to turn to the parable of the man who was healed of his possession by a demon. When the demon returned, and found the man's heart empty, he went and recruited seven spirits more virulent than himself, and takes possession of the man back by force, so that the last state of that man was worse than the first.

The absence of sweets, of alcohol, of meat on Friday, or the avoidance of the carnal lusts and worldly temptations will never make us pleasing and worthy creatures. It is only by filling that void with a godly character that we express a gratitude for the sacrifice of our salvation. It is only in keeping the second of the great commandments, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself, that we reflect the kind of gratitude that will please our Lord.

We read this encounter with the blind man as a glorious miracle proving the power of God. In fact, it is a powerful rebuke of the Apostles and disciples for responding to the revelation of the suffering that was to come, by being self important, uncaring and self centered.

The Apostles had left their families, their vocations and their possessions to follow Jesus. Compared to our Lenten pieties, they gave "up" a lot. In return, they received insight into the purpose of Christ's ministry. They received foresight of the sacrifices Jesus would make on our behalf. When given the opportunity to live

the teaching of their Messiah, to emulate his love and kindness, to reflect the grace given them back into the world, it is the Apostles who are sightless and blinded to the needs of the blind man.

In fact, they not only fail to see his needs, and their responsibility to serve him, they respond with aggravation that he might distract Jesus, that he might slow down their March to their thrones at the right and left hand of the Messiah. They shut him out, They shush his pleading. They try to hurry Jesus past him.

Instead, Jesus makes them stop. He hears the pleas of the blind man. He restores him with miraculous grace. He makes him a part of the procession, a member of His company, a soul reunited and restored in the Love of the Father. Though the Apostles had given up a lot, they still had not learned what and how they had to give.

This Gospel account is a warning for us. As we work to empty ourselves of the temptations of this world, we must be careful to fill that space, that time, that devotion to the practicing of godliness, kindness, charity and love. The question for us as we prepare for the Lent to come starts with a consideration of what we will give up, but it is consummated in the lesson from this Gospel, in what we determine that we will give in its place.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen