

## First Sunday of Lent

Several years ago my ministry included a state prison up in Cameron. I had never ministered in a prison before, never felt attracted to it, but we had Catholics there, so I served them. Immediately my stereotype of prisoners didn't hold up. I admit I was probably seeing the best human beings among the offenders. If there were 2000 prisoners on site, probably 200 were Catholic, and about 20 of them came to the weekly mass. I saw the 1% for whom mass was important, who had regret. They repented of sin and followed the ideals framed in the very title of the state agency responsible for their future: the Department of Corrections. These guys wanted to correct their life and return to society. There were exceptions among the 20, of course, but overall they were impressive men with a sincere spiritual life. I met some guys who could have served on a parish council. They were bright, caring and visionary. But they had all done something wrong. One of them had too much to drink one night and was driving his best friends home when he crashed the car and killed them all; he survived. One man caused the death of many. Other drivers have taken the same risk and miraculously escaped tragedy, but they put the lives of others at stake. You don't even have to be drunk; there are elderly people behind the wheel who put themselves and other cars at risk. Talking on the phone or texting while driving does the same. Many of us lead very good lives, but the risks we take threaten to damage ourselves and others.

Even in less dramatic ways we're all aware of sins we have committed that hurt other people or broke a relationship. We wish we could take back some words we said, some deeds we did. If you have regrets, that not only means you have the capacity for sin; your regret shows your capacity for repentance. We cannot put the pieces back the way they were before, but we can go forward, wiser about the relationships we choose and how best to sustain them. Lent redeems our regrets. Lent is our Department of Corrections.

The First Sunday of Lent this year includes a masterful passage from Paul's Letter to the Romans about Adam and Christ, sin and grace. Paul says of Adam, "Through one man sin entered the world, and through sin, death, and thus death came to all." You think you have regrets over the way your sins hurt other people? Imagine Adam, whose sin brought death to every human being. How could anyone overcome that grief? Paul has the answer: "if by the transgression of the one [Adam], the many died, how much more did the grace of God and the gracious gift of the one man Jesus Christ overflow for the many.... Just as through one transgression condemnation came upon all, so, through one righteous act, acquittal and life came to all." One person, Adam, brought sin and death; one person, Jesus Christ, brought pardon and life. Paul sums this up in one of the most beautiful lines in all his letters: "the gift is not like the transgression." The gift of Christ is more powerful than the transgression of Adam, and more powerful than any transgression of yours.

We begin Lent with regret. But that regret should not keep us in prison. It should encounter the hope we have in Jesus Christ. He pardons those who repent. In Lent we remember our transgressions, but we do not dwell on them. We've received a greater gift. We may never restore our lives the way they were before, but something new can come. If we repent, Christ brings life.

Sunday, March 1, 2020