

## LENT BEGINS WITH A VINCENTIAN TOUCH

Reflection by Archbishop Emeritus Sylvain Lavoie OMI – March 2020

The readings for the first day of the first week of Lent (Leviticus 19:1-18 and Matthew 25:31-46), should warm the hearts of all Vincentians, as they validate our efforts, first of all to be holy and just ourselves, and then to help the poor, bring about greater justice and equality, and make the world a better place for all.

In Leviticus, God speaks to Moses and gives him an overarching commandment: he and the people are to be holy. Then God reminds Moses of the Ten Commandments that were given to him in the Book of Exodus, expressed somewhat differently in Leviticus, teaching us how to be holy.

The first way to be holy would be to keep the Ten Commandments, with their focus on honesty and justice especially.

The second way to be holy is to love our neighbour as ourselves. This is the line from Leviticus Jesus selected from a plethora of Old Testament laws and placed on a par with the great *Shema* of Israel, which is to love God with our whole being. What is new and unique with Jesus is that he is the only one to place love of neighbour and love of self on a par with love of God. For Jesus, the best way to love God is to love others, especially our enemies. What is also new is that Jesus personalizes the Old Testament commandments: to keep them is to love him.

St. Mother Theresa of Calcutta put it this way: “What we would want to do for Jesus, whom we cannot see, we can do for the person next to us, whom we can see, and we will be doing it for Jesus.” In the New Testament, the poor are the brothers and sisters of Jesus. The saying, “To be close to God, be close to people” is another way to express it.

The gospel on Ash Wednesday was even more explicit. To be holy is to carry out the corporal and spiritual works of mercy Pope Francis mentioned in his bull announcing the Extraordinary Holy Year of Mercy. The corporal works of mercy are to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead.

These come straight from Matthew’s gospel, upon which Jesus states bluntly we will be judged in the next life. It is not how many prayers we said or masses we attended that are important – it is whether or not we loved God in and through our neighbour, who is anyone in need.

It is not so much that God will judge us; we will judge ourselves by the way we lived. In Palestine, the shepherd walks ahead of his flock. The sheep naturally follow the lead sheep, while the goats naturally follow the lead goat. Being a sheep and part of the flock of Jesus in this life, means we will be a sheep and part of his flock in the next. Being a goat in this life, means we will probably choose to be a goat in the next!

The spiritual works of mercy are to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offences, bear patiently those who do us ill, and pray for the living and the dead. Some spiritual writers claim we will be confronted in the next life by those we have either loved or not loved in this life.

The story of Martin the Cobbler illustrates this well. A humble shoemaker, his one desire is to see the Lord. As the day goes by, a variety of people come his way, needing help in one way or another. That night he has a dream informing him that each of those persons was the Lord.

The Eucharist is both our motivation and empowerment to live out the works of mercy. We believe in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist; now we have to go out, recognize him in the faces we see, and serve him by serving them.

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