

Father O'Connor's Homily for 2 March 2025
Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time-C

Sirach 27: 4-7
1 Corinthians 15: 54-58
Luke 6: 39-45

The season of Lent opens with Ash Wednesday this week. While not a holyday of obligation, I encourage you to begin this season with Mass. You will find the schedule of Masses and lots of Lenten activities and opportunities in the bulletin this weekend. Please be sure to take one home with you.

Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are days of fasting for everyone between the ages of 18 and 59. This means one full meal and two smaller meals, and no snacking on solids in between. However liquids are permitted at any time.

Ash Wednesday and Good Friday and all the Fridays of Lent are days of abstaining from meat for everyone 14 years old, and on up. There is no cap for this obligation. Another way to put it is that abstaining from meat applies to everyone from 14 to 114 years of age. [That should cover the gamut.]

We are also encouraged to do some voluntary penances during the season of Lent. Classic Scriptural practices are prayer, fasting and almsgiving. I encourage you to do something in each of these three categories.

Perhaps in the realm of prayer, you might consider adding some prayer practice that would serve you well in your spiritual life. Or perhaps bolstering up the prayer practices that are already an established part of your life.

Fasting may involve food, drink, entertainment or fasting from a particular sin that plagues us. Pope Francis recommends fasting from social media, or at least limiting the time spent on social media each day. And then using that time more beneficially.

And almsgiving: remembering those in need who can use our assistance.

These days leading up to Ash Wednesday are graced opportunities for each of us to decide "what I am going to do for Lent this year that, with God's grace, will help me to become an even better disciple of Jesus."

And this leads us to the cross of Jesus, and appreciating more deeply what He has done for all of us sinners.

We are so accustomed to seeing Jesus on the cross that it may never occur to us to ask: Did Jesus have a sense of humor?

Did Jesus ever smile and laugh and tell jokes? Well, since He is fully human as well as fully divine, wouldn't that be part of His makeup?

Not necessarily. We all know someone who is downright serious. As one person said about another: “He must have at least one smile buried deep down inside of him that is still making its way to his face.”

There is another problem: we may have been taught that laughter has no place in church, because religion is “serious business,” after all.

So the question remains: Did Jesus have a sense of humor? And, if so, how did He use it in His ministry?

Well, the Gospel for this Sunday before Ash Wednesday shows Jesus telling some parables – some stories with a teaching-point – that He might not have told with a serious face.

Imagine Jesus saying with a smile, “Hey, did you hear the one about the blind guy who tried to lead another blind guy around? And they both fell into a pit. What do you think about that?”

Or, “How about the man with a wooden beam in his eye.” And then Jesus pokes fun at that man for making such a big deal over a mere splinter in his brother’s eye. A humorous image, yes?

Then Jesus talks about farming, cleverly reminding his farmer-audience that “figs don’t come from thorn bushes, and grapes don’t come from brambles, now do they, guys?”

People must have smiled. Only later, perhaps, would they realize that there was indeed a teaching-point wrapped up in those light-hearted stories.

Jesus, like so many of the ancients, told stories – some funny, some serious, and all with a teaching-point in them – because such stories were bearers of truth in a way that everyone, from the youngest to the oldest, could understand and could learn from.

Try these contemporary variations on Jesus’ humor:

When Fr. Stan first came to Saint Denis Parish and began to impress people with his vision and energy, a man said to his friend, “You know, I have nothing but praise for our new pastor.” To which his friend replied dryly, “So I noticed when the collection basket passed you by. You had nothing but praise to offer our new pastor.” [You can almost hear a little drum roll here.]

Then there is the one about the couple leaving church one Sunday after Mass. The wife asked her husband, “Did you see that awful hat that Mrs. O’Brien was wearing?” “No,” he said. “And did you notice those cutely-dressed little girls in the pew ahead of us?” “No, I didn’t,” he said. “Well, I thought that Bill Smith really needed a haircut, didn’t you?” “Sorry, but I didn’t notice,” he said.

“Honestly, John,” his wife said impatiently, “sometimes I wonder if you get anything at all out of going to church.” [And there is a lesson here somewhere too, isn’t there?]

They are light-hearted stories, but with a teaching-point to think about, like some of Jesus’s parables in today’s Gospel and those that we will hear and reflect upon during the season of Lent.

And here is a final story to think about, the kind that Jesus might have told:

A ship was wrecked and only two of its sailors were able to swim to a small deserted island. They agreed that all they could do now was pray to God. However, to find out whose prayers were more powerful, they agreed to divide the island in half and to stay on opposite sides.

The first man prayed for food. And the next morning he saw a fruit-bearing tree on his side of the island and he was able to eat. The other man’s parcel of land remained barren.

After some days, the first man grew lonely so he prayed for a wife. The next day another ship was wrecked and the only survivor was a woman who swam to his side of the island. On the other side of the island, the second man had no one to be with.

Then the first man prayed for lodging that was full of food and clothes. The next day, miraculously, all of these were given to him. However, the second man still had nothing.

Finally, the first man prayed for a rescue ship so that he and his girlfriend could leave the island and get married. The next morning he found a ship docked at his side of the island. So he and his girlfriend boarded the ship, and he decided to leave the second man behind on the island. He considered this man unworthy of God’s blessings since none of his prayers had been answered.

As the ship was about to leave, the first man heard a booming voice from heaven, “Why are you leaving your companion all alone on this island?”

“The blessings that I received are all mine because I was the one who prayed for them,” he replied to God. “All his prayers went unanswered, so he doesn’t deserve anything.”

“You are mistaken,” God said. “He had only one prayer, which I did answer.”

“Tell me, Lord, what did he pray for that I should owe him anything?”

“He prayed,” God said, “that all your prayers would be answered.”

I think that Jesus might have told a story like this, smiled, and then walked away, leaving His audience time to reflect upon what He was teaching them.

That sounds like a pretty good idea to me right now.