

II Lent 2022
Sermon-Saint Joseph Parish
Father Craig Looney
I Thess. 4.1-8 St. Matt. 15.21-28



War had left the country in a mess. Buildings had been destroyed. Many people were killed. Earthquakes, disease and starvation threatened to kill many more. The economy was shot. Lives were ruined.

We could be talking about current events. But the scene above actually describes the perilous conditions in Italy in 568 AD after the Lombards invaded the country. Against this backdrop of civil strife, the Church faced its own challenges. Most of the Lombards were pagans. Some were Arians whose views about Jesus...that he was not God...were condemned by the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. Neither group was particularly friendly toward the Church in Italy.

Pope Gregory the Great wanted to give the people hope. He instituted the Pre-Lenten Season as an extension of Lent...a special time of prayer for increased faith, courage and endurance. The Collect for today the Second Sunday in Lent...one of the oldest in the *Prayer Book*...was composed at this time. Its words are as compelling today as they were in the 6th century...

...“Almighty God, you see we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves; Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls; and defend us from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord”.

Father Massey Shepherd, author of the *Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary*, writes God’s power is necessary to defend us from outward attacks of our bodies, whether physical or moral, and from inward evil thoughts that attack the soul and lead us to outward evil deeds.

Our Lenten Journey to the cross helps us understand our spiritual and physical health can’t be split apart...they work together. Jesus spent much of his public ministry restoring peoples’ spiritual and physical lives. People came to him for help...he didn’t check their passports...he helped them whoever they were and wherever they came from.

In the Gospel Jesus is approached by a mother desperate to have him heal her daughter. “Help me, sir! My daughter has a demon and is in a terrible condition.” Her pleas are met with silence. The mother was a Canaanite...the original inhabitants of the area Jesus and the disciples were walking through. They were pagans and considered unclean. Most Jews wouldn’t have wanted to be around a Canaanite, much less talk to one.

Undeterred by Jesus’ apparent dismissiveness, our desperate mother falls down at his feet and begs for his help. She is a brave and determined woman. Jesus then does something completely out of character. He looks directly at her and tells her it’s not right to give the children’s food to dogs. Ouch! Dogs were considered unclean b Jews and Canaanites. They hung around garbage dumps. Jesus has called our desperate mother a dog...not exactly a compliment even today.

Our mother has a comeback. “Well, maybe that’s true”, she said to Jesus. “But even dogs get to eat scraps that fall from their master’s table.” In the end Jesus tells our mother her daughter will get well. Her faith was so great she was willing to argue with Jesus. Jesus wants us to be just as determined and persistent in asking God for help...by increasing our faith and courage and endurance in tough situations. That means, as Paul tells us in the Epistle, living our lives to please God and not giving into temptations.

Paul is concerned not only with avoiding sexual immorality, but anything sinful in material matters, including fraudulent business practices and hateful actions. God makes our lives holy and we want to keep them holy. We can only do that by admitting we can’t do this by ourselves. We need help...God gave us his Holy Spirit to help us and keep us strong.

Later in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus said we will hear the noise of battles close by and news of wars far away; but we are not to be alarmed by what we hear. He tells us these things must happen; but the end is not yet here and we are to remain firm in our faith. Our Action Plan for remaining firm...today’s Collect!

Jesus also said he came to bring us abundant life in mind, body and soul. We believe he does...and has...and will continue to do so!

