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Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Last year I celebrated the Sacred Triduum in my living room via video conference. As novel as that may have been, it was of course very disappointing not being able to celebrate the Lord's Passion and Resurrection in church. But armed with hope and optimism I suspect many of us were expecting "business as usual" by early summer.

Not only didn't that transpire but by Christmas, although churches were open, we continued to find ourselves under the dark cloud of Covid. Things would not be going back to the way they were, something we have all been waking up to, slowly but surely: how we shop, how we work, how we care for one another.

People respond to change in different ways: some bury their heads and create their own reality in the sand; some resist it and then reluctantly accede to what they see as inevitable, while yet others uncritically herald the latest innovation as a modern-day panacea.

So how should we approach change? Ignore it, shrug our shoulders or quickly jump on board? Taken too far each alternative presents a problem: the former is blind and out of touch, the latter naïve with the one in the middle being far too submissive.

So, what might be the truth of the matter? A good starting point is surely to identify those things that must never change while putting our shoulder behind those that can and must. What never changes you might ask? Isn't change, paradoxically, the only constant in life? Well, what about our need for salvation and release from the lockdown of sin? This is a perennial truth, as true for us as it was for Adam and Eve on the day they were served notice of eviction. We cannot self-immunise our way out of the human condition any more than we can fend off coronavirus with a home-made concoction. Intervention is needed. So, what a great joy indeed that the world has been shot through with an unchanging sign of hope, a hope we have recently celebrated with the birth of Our Lord.

But that was Christmas, this coming Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the start of Lent. By starting this holy season with the words “remember you are dust and unto dust you will return” we are reminded of something that never changes: our utter dependence on God’s mercy. At the conclusion of Lent we celebrate the Resurrection, another unchanging reality, yet one that ironically changes everything. Some will deny this, some will shrug it off but this is the one truth for us all to embrace. Without something that never changes, there can be no change at all...only chaos, a house built on sand.

Between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday, just as between our baptism and our funeral, the vocation of us all is to deepen the foundations of our faith. Only in this way can we truly be agents of change, change in our own hearts but also a leaven in the world in bearing witness to Christ. Traditionally during Lent we do this by:

Prayer. If we do not start with prayer, we will simply be a clanging cymbal. More activist than evangelist.

Fasting. A reminder that we are contingent beings. A fancy way of saying that we only have our existence in and through God. Fasting reminds us of the need and hunger we have for the One who made us.

Almsgiving. While most commonly referring to financial giving it could just as well refer to giving people time, listening to them, being present, even forgiving.

This Lent look at your own life. What is it built on? Are you on shaky ground? Be brutally honest with yourself. At the same time where has your faith been strengthened during this past year? Thank God for that and continue to build there.

Lent encourages us to take a hard look at our life, to reflect on it in prayer and it calls us to repentance and conversion of heart. Its purpose is not to weigh us down with guilt and self-recrimination, but to invite us to true life which can only be found in the Risen Lord, the same yesterday, today and forever.

May this Lent help you grow closer to our God who never changes so He may use you to change the world.

With prayers for you all on your Lenten journey.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+Paul". The plus sign is small and positioned to the left of the name.