

1 Lent B

February 21, 2021

St. Patrick

Did you hear from this Sunday's Scriptures that line from the First Letter of St. Peter?—"an appeal to God for a good conscience"—a "clear conscience."

How many of us truly ache to have a "clear conscience"?

Forty days. St. Mark's Gospel puts it like this, "**The Spirit *drove* Jesus—*hurled* (1) Jesus—into the wilderness for forty days.**"

Well, for these past eleven months many of us have experienced our own "wilderness." Because of the pandemic, we too have been "*hurled*" into the wilderness—largely confined within our own residence. We've been tempted by isolation, by fear of the virus, and by loneliness. Furthermore, *this* Lent began almost as a bad joke. We've been blanketed by so much snow that few of us have ventured out in any way. The wilderness of this long year took an unexpected turn on Ash Wednesday with a winter storm we haven't had in ten years. As if we needed a different twist to our isolation!

First, St. Patrick's, we need to know what Lent is all about. If I asked you to choose an emoji for Lent—well, I think many of us would choose a face which is sad, having a big frown, a somber look. Listen, then, to what Pope St. Leo the Great, in the 5th century, taught in one of his renowned Lenten sermons: "**The special note of the paschal feast is this: The whole Church *rejoices* in the forgiveness of sins. It rejoices in the forgiveness not only of those who are then reborn in holy baptism, but also of those who are already numbered among God's adopted children**" (2).

"**The whole Church *rejoices*...**" Pope St. Leo would choose an emoji with a very happy face—broad grin and bright eyes! And that is the *real* look for Lent.

We heard in the Gospel about Jesus' baptism. Then, the First Letter of St. Peter gives its teaching on our baptism, foreshadowed in the great flood of Noah's time. Listen to what Peter teaches: "**Baptism...now saves you...as an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus.**"

You see, Friends, all of Lent puts its focus not only on Jesus' death and resurrection, but also on baptism. Indeed, at every Easter Mass throughout the

world, we're called to renew our baptismal promises. Then, we're all sprinkled with baptismal water. You see, we can enjoy a "clear conscience" because of Jesus being raised from the dead and sharing his new life with us. It's not our good efforts which brings about a "good conscience." No, it's a *gift*, and the Risen Jesus wants to lift off from our shoulders the backpack of guilt and remorse and shame. As Pope St. Leo the Great bellows out about Lent and Easter: **"The whole church rejoices in the forgiveness of sins."**

Sure, in our wilderness of this Lent, we detour around the cacti of self-righteousness. With Jesus leading us in our wilderness, we make sure we don't stumble over those stones of anger and resentment. We make our Lent special by the Lenten resolve each of us makes for these forty days. In our struggle with the Evil One, Satan, Jesus is with us. He wants us to choose an emoji of a very happy face! We take the next step—perhaps the Sacrament of Reconciliation, confession—yes, some step toward Jesus that he might lift off our shoulders the backpack of guilt and shame. It's *his* victory and *his* gift. He wants us to truly have a "clear conscience" which comes from *his* love, not our efforts.

Yes, going back fifteen centuries all the way to now, Pope St. Leo the Great keeps reminding us at the start of Lent: **"The whole church rejoices in the forgiveness of sins."**

I wonder if there's an emoji for a "clear conscience."

(1) See that the verb "ekballei" can be translated "hurled," in James Martin, S.J., *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* (New York: Harper One, 2014), pg. 107.

(2) Pope St. Leo the Great, from a Lenten Sermon—"Sermo 6 de Quadragesima," 1-2: PL 54, 285-287; in *The Liturgy of Hours*, volume II (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1976), pg. 60.

General Intercessions

February 21, 2021

First Sunday of Lent

You remember your covenant forever: Inspire us to be your faithful followers, and help us support one another on our Lenten journey; we pray to you, O Lord—

You fasted in the wilderness for forty days: Satisfy those who hunger in body, mind, or spirit; we pray to you, O Lord—

You lift up those who are suffering: Bring recovery to all who are going through the recent winter storms; we pray to you, O Lord—

You free the oppressed: On this Black History Month, empower us to overcome racism and bigotry in all its forms; we pray to you, O Lord—

You feed us with your living Word: Open the minds and hearts of all Christians to the Scriptures, that we might follow you to the cross; we pray to you, O Lord—

You heal the sick: Return to health those who suffer from Covid-19; console their loved ones in their anguish; give us care in protecting others from the coronavirus; and deepen hope within us all; we pray to you, O Lord—

