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**Pastoral Letter to be read
on the Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time 2016
Sunday, 7th February 2016
*The Jubilee year of Mercy***

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The scripture readings this Sunday give us an insight as to how we might approach the penitential Season of Lent which begins this coming Wednesday, Ash Wednesday.

God had great faith in the prophet Isaiah, in Simon Peter, and in St. Paul despite their frailty, weaknesses and sinfulness. Isaiah is frightened when he experiences the vision of God in the sanctuary of the Temple. In that personal encounter with the living God, Isaiah becomes very conscious of his unworthiness, his faults and failings: "What a wretched state I am in! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips." But God reassures him through the words and actions of an angel, "See now ... your sin is taken away, your iniquity is purged." With his sins forgiven, Isaiah's life is radically changed and in thanksgiving he responds to God's bidding: "Here I am, send me." And so he becomes one of the greatest prophets of the Old Testament.

Similarly, Simon Peter, experiencing the miraculous catch of fish after a fruitless night's fishing, realises that in Jesus he is in the presence of great goodness, and falls on his knees before Jesus simply saying to him, "Leave me Lord; I am a sinful man." Jesus doesn't reject him. His response is one of acceptance, compassion and mercy. "Do not be afraid; from now on it is men you will catch." Then, like Isaiah's response to God, Simon Peter and his companions respond immediately to the graciousness of Jesus - "they left everything and followed him."

St. Paul, the one-time persecutor of the infant Church, encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus and had a remarkable conversion of heart, was baptised and became the great apostle to the Gentiles. Writing to the Christians in Corinth, he reminds them of his history: "I am the least of the apostles; in fact, since I persecuted the Church of God, I hardly deserve the name apostle; but by God's grace that is what I am, and the grace that he gave me has not been fruitless." And then he reminds them of the truth that is at the heart of the Paschal Mystery of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ: "Christ died for our sins."

All three were well aware of their unworthiness, their limitations and inadequacies. But, through their encounter with the living God, they also became aware that God didn't hold that against them. They begin to appreciate that God is "slow to anger and rich in mercy"; the God of infinite love, mercy and compassion, always ready to forgive their sins and fill their hearts with the joy of his presence. It was as if God said to them, "Don't be frightened; don't worry about your sins. I'm not going to condemn you. I am always ready to wipe away your sins, to forgive you and help you to make a fresh start. You are precious in my sight and I love you, and I will never stop loving you whatever you might do. I know your frailty, weakness and inadequacy. I believe in you and accept you just as you are, and I want you to believe in my passionate love for you. That's why I sent my Son to you, to convince you of my love, compassion and mercy. I am always ready to forgive your sins and give you my peace in your heart, and to gently challenge you to make a fresh start with the help of my grace. Rejoice in my readiness to forgive you; experience my infinite mercy and compassion. Then you will discover that you are capable of a better way of life. Then I want you to go out and treat others as I have treated you, with love, mercy and compassion. Have a special care for the sick, the hungry and thirsty, the lonely, the oppressed, and those in prison."

So our focus in Lent must be first of all on God, not ourselves. We do that when we spend time in quiet prayer rooted in reflection on the scriptures. As the Psalmist puts it, "Be still and know that I am God." In that quiet prayer we gradually learn to hear the living Word of God speaking deep in our hearts. Then we will experience in our own lives, the infinite love and mercy of God, and our hearts begin to be changed and become more and more like that of Jesus himself. It is with this change of heart that we will be given the courage and strength to serve God and our neighbour more generously, especially our neighbour who is in need, because in that neighbour we are called to look with love and compassion on the face of the suffering Christ in our midst and do what we can to alleviate his suffering.

The danger in Lent is that we can focus in the wrong way on ourselves and the particular ways we choose to live out this penitential Season. The purpose of Lent is to open our hearts to the life-giving grace and mercy of God who will reveal to us the truth about ourselves, our motives, and our priorities in life. All that we do in Lent, our prayer, our fasting and our almsgiving are means to this end – not ends in themselves. The end and purpose of Lent is to grow closer to God our Father, to appreciate how much he loves us, and to allow God's grace to change us for the better.

My dear brothers and sisters, during this Lent let's ask God's help to look at ourselves with great honesty, confident that he loves us just as we are, and that he will always show us his mercy and compassion as, with the help of his grace, our lives will be changed for the better. Each day of Lent, may our prayer be this: "Lord, open my ears that I may hear; open my eyes that I may see; open my heart and rekindle within it the fire of your love."

With an assurance of my prayers and blessing for you all,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Poler', with a small cross symbol to the left of the first letter.

Archbishop of Southwark

Given at Southwark, 28th January, 2016, Memorial of St Thomas Aquinas.