

I speak to you in the name of God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.  
Please be seated.

The late Canadian theologian Herbert O’Driscoll summarizes our readings for this third Sunday in Lent as such: “To be human is to long for many things. Those who long after God will find themselves satisfied. They will also find a God in whom judgement and mercy are mingled together”. I am just going to read that again: “To be human is to long for many things. Those who long after God will find themselves satisfied. They will also find a God in whom judgement and mercy are mingled together”. This is a very timely message for us as we move towards Palm Sunday and Easter. We are reminded that this is a time for us to examine the choices in our lives; where we set our moral, ethical and spiritual compass will determine much of our lives’ happiness and senses of satisfaction and peace. Our readings this morning keep us mindful of how, as human beings, we are able to imagine possibilities and to dream of our futures. But we are also reminded of the importance of free will, and choosing to yearn for a future way of being that is less about earthly things so much as about holy things; because it will be in the holiness that we find long lasting and deep satisfaction. It is a bit of a paradox that we are able to imagine many life scenarios for our futures, but we are very limited in our abilities to understand eternity. In our readings, we get a glimpse into people from many years ago being challenged with the same question that we are deeply challenged with during our present day: Will this choice that I am making satisfy me for a few moments, or will this satisfy me into eternity?

In our Old Testament passage, the prophet Isaiah is pleading with the people to reimagine a set of values that will focus them on God rather than on earthly things when he says, “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?” But Isaiah also acknowledges that there are those in his community that have nothing to eat because they have no

money. But in doing this, he is also highlighting that there is a disparity amongst the people; those who have, and those who have not. He is saying that, if there was more of a spirit of sharing, there would be much less poverty. Those that received some act of charity would not go hungry, and those who engaged in charitable acts would have a sense of deep satisfaction for having helped others. The crux of Isaiah's message comes in verse 3: "Incline your ear and come to me; listen so that you may live". Isaiah is not naively telling the people that wealth, power, and influence don't exist. One of the very powerful aspects of the Jewish tradition is that it has always been grounded in people's realities. The people of the Jewish faith have always been encouraged to have spiritual goals, but to also think through the ramifications of achieving those goals in this world. In itself, wealth is neither good nor evil. But accumulating wealth as a primary purpose for living is, ultimately, not satisfying nor is it consistent with the values that bring life to self and to others. The same is true of power and influence.

In our New Testament reading, Paul is admonishing the people of Corinth to remain as a united community, to draw on the examples of their predecessors who faced challenging times. In this way, he is trying to ignite their imaginations to see a different kind of future, one grounded in the values of loyalty, perseverance, and a focus on Christ. Paul acknowledges that, when human beings are involved, there are going to be mistakes made and things will sometimes go south and need to be repaired or realigned. In this way, he is very much like Isaiah. He is not peddling a kind of utopia to the community of Corinth. Rather, he is acknowledging certain realities of life, but at the same time strongly encouraging the people to make choices grounded in values that are sometimes at odds with the rest of the world. Neither Isaiah nor Paul are promising their people that, if they follow a different way of life, they will never have struggles – quite the opposite. But what they are saying is that they will bear those struggles together and work towards a different

reality of God's Kingdom here on Earth. And, they are saying that remaining true to a certain set of values will ultimately be a more satisfying way of life – now, and into eternity.

As always, our Gospel passage chosen for this morning really brings the point home. Jesus uses one of his most powerful teaching methods, the parable, to emphasize the importance of choice and of repentance. Again, I would draw our attention to the words of the late Herbert O'Driscoll concerning our lectionary for today: "To be human is to long for many things. Those who long after God will find themselves satisfied. They will also find a God in whom judgement and mercy are mingled together". There is a human tendency to think that bad things happen to us because we are being punished by God. This was certainly the case for the Jewish people of the Old Testament who viewed God as this kind of vengeful power that was always watching them to catch them out for some kind of wrongdoing. It was this fear that brought about many of the traditions of the Jewish faith. However, Jesus is talking about a new kind of relationship between humanity and God; one in which God is compassionate and merciful. He is very careful to say that a belief in and reliance on God will not mean that nothing bad will ever happen in our lives. Like Isaiah and Paul, Jesus is acknowledging that there are realities to this human life. It is our physical nature that we will sometimes become sick or suffer tragedies, and that, ultimately, our physical bodies will die. If there was no physical death in this life, then there would be no point to the journey of the soul. God's promise of eternal life is for the soul, not for the physical self. Why would we be motivated to grow in our spirituality, in our abilities to make a difference in this world and to fight for social justice if we knew that we had unlimited time in this life? Why would we be motivated to repent and to turn away from sin and towards God if we had unending time to do so? Why would we tend to our human relationships? For one thing, the earth itself

could not sustain humanity if there was no death. Creation can renew itself under certain conditions, but human immortality would not allow for that unless there was no new birth. The Jewish tradition holds that there is a kind of corridor of souls waiting to be born on earth, and that corridor is known as “the guff”. This is mentioned in the Jewish Talmud. The belief is that, when the guff becomes empty, that will mark the end of time for humanity. We live this mortal life having been imbued with a soul, and the idea is that we live this life and experience all that we experience as a way for the soul to grow and to become a greater spiritual force in the time that we have to live. Spiritual awakening and growth only comes when we turn away from sin and let go of the secular belief that money, power, and influence are all that are of value in this life. Spiritual awakening and growth only come when we turn towards God and centre our lives on Christian values. In the parable of the fig tree, Jesus reminds his listeners that God is both patient and compassionate, and will work circumstances in our lives that will help to nourish that spiritual awakening and that spiritual growth. God, as spiritual gardener, will remain with us until the end. But, as Jesus reminds us, we have the responsibility to make choices that will nurture our souls while we still can. There is a time limit to this life, and in this season of Lent, we are focused on the idea of repentance – a turning away from the values that nurture sin, and turning towards God and towards values that nurture the growth of the soul. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus continually reminds people that there are two realities – the physical and the spiritual. He acknowledges, for example, that drinking from a well will temporarily quench the physical need for water. But he also speaks to the spiritual water, the living word of God, that will provide unending quenching of thirst for the soul.

And so, as we move deeper into our Lenten season and towards Easter, we are challenged to reflect on how we are living in this temporal life, to consider

what values steer the choices we make. But we are also challenged to consider how those values and choices impact the growth of our souls. The physical world will eventually fall away for all of us when we die. What is the future that you long for, that you imagine for your soul? What would it be like for your soul to feel really satisfied in this life, and to then carry that forward into eternity? These questions are what is really at the heart of Lent, and my prayer for all of this week, including myself, is that we take some time to think on these things and to have those conversations with God. Amen.