

MARCH 7, 2025 FATHER MICHAEL COUTTS

As I was listening to that reading from Isaiah, I could not help thinking that the whole list of things that Isaiah mentions is almost a duplicate of Matthew chapter 25, when Jesus speaks about the Last Judgement.

When he will separate the good from the bad, the sheep from the goats. And if you notice very carefully as you read that, Jesus does not say that you are good because you have been for Mass every Sunday. He doesn't say you are good because you've said the Rosary, the Divine Mercy, that you have fasted, that you have said prayers. He doesn't say that you are good because you are an usher in the church, you sang in the choir, you were a lector at the altar. He doesn't say you are good because you were in the CWL, or the Saint Vincent de Paul, or the Knights of Columbus. Jesus just expects you, as a believer, to do that. He says it is something much more than that.

Everybody who believes in Jesus is expected to do that, that is the basis, the foundation of the holiness. And Isaiah says the same thing in that first reading today. He says that people follow the ordinances of the Lord. People fast. People humble themselves. But what are you to say about yourself, do you pat yourself on the back because you have done that? No, you are expected to do that, because the Lord has made a covenant with you. "You are my people, and I am your God." This is to be expected. And in the New Testament, Jesus says the same. If you believe in me, you are supposed to love your neighbour as yourself, keep the commandments. It's expected of you, because even the Gentiles do it in the same way.

And then comes something that is unexpected. Both Isaiah and Jesus kick it up a notch. They say to us, if you see somebody who is poor, feed

him. But it goes much more than that. How many of us will not only feed the poor, but will bring them to our table? I remember that when I was a seminarian, I went to the school where I studied, they were run by the Jesuit fathers, and there was a young man, very attractive, very talented, and I said, congratulations, you're working over here as a house guest, and in the kitchen, and all that, and 40 years later, I went, he was still there, he had grown older, obviously, married and had children.

And I asked him, I said in these 40 years have you ever sat down with our fathers, with our brothers, and had a cup of tea? He says, "Father, I can't do that." I said, why not? You are a human being just like them. Why didn't they invite you to come to the table, and eat with you? And he just looked absolutely shocked. But that is exactly what Jesus is telling us to do. If you see somebody who is hungry, not only give them something, but perhaps invite them to your table. That takes a lot of courage, and that is the attitude and the spirit of Lent.

It's not only a change of mind, but it's a change of heart, right from our very being. And he says if anybody you see that is without clothes, and especially during this winter that we are having, and it's a severe winter, we find people who are homeless... Are we ready to gather scarves, and anoraks and gloves, then hats, and toques for them? And then do we just give it to somebody who will distribute to them, or do we have the courage to go out, and actually hand it to them ourselves? That requires a lot of courage indeed.

And he says, if you see somebody is homeless, will you take them into your home? That requires more than courage, it requires a love that only Christ has shown for us, we who are sheep, who are lost, who are looking out, and feel abandoned, and the Good Shepherd has gathered us

together again. And this is especially needed in our day and life, when with the new forms of government all over the world, what is happening? The rich are getting richer, they are tax-exempt. The middle class are becoming poorer and disenfranchised. And the poor people are losing their jobs, losing their homes, losing their dignity, losing every hope whatsoever.

The reason for doing all this is because they said, Well, if we make the rich, and we give them tax exemptions, and even cut off their taxes, then they will do business, and when the business is done, then there will be a trickle down, and even the poor will be helped, because there are a lot of businesses there will be a lot of jobs and employment. Beautiful in theory, but in reality it does not happen. As we know, and we see so very often. How often I had seen a person who has been, you know, a person dressed up in full suit, with jacket and tie, going to work, and then, one day we see him in the homeless, on the streets, in downtown Toronto.

And when I asked him, I said what happened? He says, Well, the rents grew higher, my job did not pay as much, I lost my job, I lost my home, and here I am on the street. I've kept all my clothes, just in case I get a job again. This is the story of our life. And this is the story that Jesus tells us, to go out, and to reach the poor, to reach the hungry, to reach the naked, and to bring them into our own homes. Isaiah warned us about the lessons today. He says, very often we will do acts of humility, very often we will fast, very often we will follow the ordinance of the Lord, and very often we will read the holy books.

But these are all a cover-up. It prevents me from getting down, and meeting people in their needs. And it's only when I can see in them the face and the love of Jesus Christ, that I can reach out to them. Otherwise, I see a needy person who is always asking for something more. And the

beauty about it is, the Lord will take care of the marginalized. From the beginning, we hear that the favourite people of God are the "Anawim," the people who have absolutely nothing. And these are the people who reach out to us, and the beautiful part of this Lenten service is the scenario in which God calls us to be a part of that divine grace that you and I can show to the people around.

It is pointless telling people that God loves them, unless I can show them, in very tangible form. Wherein I can get out of my own comfort zone, and go out, and reach. And believe me, I shirk that very often. I use it as a cover-up, and say, you know what, I have to celebrate Mass, I have to pray, I have to go to my office, I have to write this homily, I have to give this retreat. All false excuses. I know that deep down, within my heart. But I'll use them in order to keep people at bay. And the Lord says as long as you're doing that, even the Gentiles do that. What you are called to do is to get out of your comfort zone, to reach out, and then your prayer, your fasting, and your almsgiving will have even more value than what you think it has. God bless you all.