



40 Days of Lent

**DAILY
TV MASS**

ONLINE RETREAT

DAYS 17-22

DAY 17
DEACON ROBERT KINGHORN
WHERE ARE YOUR WOUNDS

Many years ago, I heard the story of a school principal in South Africa who quit his job rather than submit to the school's apartheid policy of racial discrimination. His friends told him he was crazy, but he said, "One day I am going to meet God, and God will ask me, 'Where are your wounds?' If I reply that I have no wounds, God will ask me, 'Was there nothing worth fighting for?' I could not bare to face that question."

The ministry of the Church on the Street, is a worthy fight against the loneliness that is often in the heart of the homeless and drug addicted. Or maybe it is better described as, "Alone-ness." You know, that feeling we all have at times that there must be some small corner of this wide world where we will be accepted, cherished, included, and find intimacy. That there must be more to life than what we are living just now. And yet, often we cannot help ourselves, and we run away from the very thing that will bring us that life. We run away from connection with others. It's an "Alone-ness" that reminds us of the humiliations we have experienced, of the rejections we have endured, and the limitations of a life in which we feel trapped. This is the "Alone-ness" which Jesus entered into when he came to offer us hope and new life.

Recently I met a friend I had not seen for a few months, and we reminisced about our journey together over the past sixteen years, since I met her on the street. It has been a walk from addiction, prostitution, imprisonment, and "Alone-ness. A walk that has brought her through cancer, sobriety, relapse, and finally sobriety again. A walk that has taken her through all of the temptations that Jesus experienced.

Yes, she has many wounds from this life, but she has had moments too when she knew that God was her only strength. And others when she would express her feelings that God would never accept anyone with her history and reputation. The journey of faith can be a lonely one unless we have the support of others. This is what continues to impress me about her, that she continues to ask others to pray for her and to walk with her on her journey. She knows her faith is weak, and yet this is the very thing that gives it strength. At those moments when she stumbles, as we all do, she has friends to continue the journey by her side: no questions, no lectures, just unconditional love.

Her life reflects the life of so many people on the street. They have this deep faith that there is a God, but need support at these moments when they feel abandoned. One young lady expressed it this way as she wiped tears from her misty eyes, “Look, I am a Catholic and I believe there is a God up there. Tonight I needed prayers, and here you are. Please pray with me. Tonight, I know there is a God. Thank you. You made my night.”

DAY 18
CHURCH ON THE STREET
TAKE UP YOUR CROSS

A few years ago, I was sitting with my friend Ann in Nazareth House, a sanctuary for women who have been on the street, and who are once again reclaiming their true identity. As we spoke, she cradled her two-month-old son in her arms and rocked him gently. Ann and I go back about 19 years on the street. I remember when we first met. She was sitting on a wall waiting for clients to go by. She stopped me and asked me to sit on the wall beside her. She said, “Listen to this. And then from memory she recited psalm 13. She recited just as the psalmist had written it, with passion and with a voice crying out to the Lord. ”How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord’s praise, for the Lord has been good to me. A few weeks later, I saw her again and this time she asked me, “You know when Jesus promised the good thief on the cross that he would be with him in paradise, do you think he will ever say that to me? I told her that I honestly believe if Jesus does not say it to her, then he will never say that to me. A few years later, after she got clean of drugs, she recalled this conversation when she came with me to talk at a convention to about 1,000 women. She said, “I remember I told Deacon Robert I did not believe God would accept me. But now I know it was the drugs that were talking and not me. Now I believe that Jesus will accept me. Such holiness.

She is off the streets now and has graduated as an addictions' counsellor. But it was not long after she started work that the cross she carried became a little heavier. At work she had been a witness to gun violence and outside her workplace, and it had triggered memories that she had conveniently tucked away and labelled, "do not disturb." At that moment she was emotionally back on the street, and the experience terrified her as she realized how easy it was to slip backwards in time. She said that it had been particularly difficult because lurking beneath the exterior of "coping" are the dragons of violence and unspeakable injuries that she had endured on the street. "But" she said earnestly as she continued to look at me, "I know that is not who I am now. Yes, the memories are there, and they will never leave me, but I have learned a lot about myself over these years and I know that I am more than that girl who turned tricks on the street. I have my mother and my daughter back in my life, and I have my son right here. I pray each day, and I am grateful for all that God has given me. I know I will have these moments when the past haunts me, but I am not going back there." Like the disciples of Jesus, Ann has seen his glory and she continues on her journey with Jesus by her side.

DAY 19
CHURCH ON THE STREET
FINDING LIFE

Many years ago, I sat with a young lady on the steps of her downtown squalid rooming house as she despairingly rambled through yet another monologue of self-pity and self-hatred. She was a long-time drug user who did not so much have a drug of choice, but a drug of the day. I had known her for a few years, and her doorstep had become a regular “pew” in the Church on the Street where I had heard many a non-sacramental confession from her and given a multitude of blessings. That evening she was keenly aware of her mortality and spoke of her powerlessness over the drugs that had taken over her life and had transformed her from social worker to client. She had often spent Christmas and Easter with my family, and with Easter approaching our conversation turned to the future and what hope she could see on the horizon.

At times like these all we can do is to sit and listen to the pain. We cannot turn away to look in another direction. We cannot attempt to escape into pious dreams of some future heaven. The pain is too real and too imminent to escape. We must face the mystery of the pain and find there the face of Jesus crucified and broken. Only then will we be able to kneel beside the one suffering and promise to walk with them on the difficult journey they are on. This is what can bring hope in the darkness of illness, addiction and despair; that someone cares enough to listen to the voice of illness and say, “Hello in there. How are you? How are you coping?”

“I don’t think I will be alive by Easter,” she said, “not at the rate I am going. The drug use is taking its toll on me.” All I could promise her at that moment is that my family and I would continue to be with her on

this journey. We could not walk her walk, but we could promise to be waiting on her horizon. You see, we all walk with crutches in one way or the other. But if I could give her hope that someone is there to support her on the journey then maybe she could come to believe that Jesus is also waiting for her, and he too would walk with her as support and hope along the way. It is the hope we all long for, that someone is waiting for us, ready to embrace and receive us at every step and misstep on our personal journey. Now, twenty-five years later, alive and healthy, she has returned to her profession as a social worker.

Where is God in all of this? This is the question we ask of ourselves so often when tragedy strikes, and we are left reeling; We ask it when life presents too many questions and too few answers.

Our simple response is one of presence and hope. A presence that says, “I believe in you, and perhaps my presence will bring you hope that you are not alone, and that beyond the presence of a friend is the presence of Christ risen and fully alive. There is one thing of which I am fully convinced through my time with the Church on the Street, and it is that you and I are the hope for others when we bring the presence of Christ into the midst of their despair. Despite our own sinfulness and frailty, we do this in Christ, through Christ, and with Christ, as we look forward, and trust in the power of the one who overcame death on the first Easter morning.

DAY 20
CHURCH ON THE STREET
JEAN THE PRODIGAL MOTHER

It was a cold winter's evening when I met Jean for the first time. She told me that her daughter Vera only gives her a living allowance each day so that she never has enough for drugs. However, on evenings like this she still goes on the streets to supplement her allowance with income from a life of prostitution. It was a full two years later that Jean told me she remembered this first meeting. "I remember the first night we met," she said. "I went home and I went to pieces because of your acceptance of me." However, this was short-lived and most evenings she was out again on her regular street corner. I met Jean many times over the next five years.

Often she talked of her daughter Vera who was making a documentary about their relationship. She is going to call it, "Mom and Me" and it's the story of what it is like to have a mother who is an addict and a prostitute. "There's quite a story to tell" she said. "I used to be a famous producer for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. I produced shows for the program, The Fifth Estate. You can look me up on the internet and you will see pictures of me there. But there are also pictures I am not proud of since they show me in the midst of my drug use." I invited Jean to join me at a spiritual group that I used to run at a local women's shelter, but her answer exposed the real reason for her apparent lack of faith. "God would not want someone like me at the spiritual group. I am ashamed of the things I have done and the lifestyle I am leading."

Lightning would strike if I went to a spiritual group. So, I was pleasantly surprised when the following week she came to the women's shelter and said, "I would like to join the spiritual group." In the group she shared her struggles to regain her fragile faith that once was strong, but which

was unable to support the storms that life had brought her way. I sat in awe of her honesty and humility in being able to share this deep struggle with the other ladies in the group. At the end of the meeting Jean sat in tears and said how much she enjoyed the evening.

Weeks later I walked into the women's shelter, and I was handed a letter which simply read, "God has answered my prayers, and I leave today for a drug rehab centre. "Thank you for coming into my life and for helping me to find my way back to our mutual friend, God. Love Jean."

Eventually her daughter's documentary was released, and it showed her at home for fifteen years like the biblical loving father, longing for some sign of her mother appearing on the horizon. For fifteen years she went out in search of her mother and filmed her in her favourite crack houses and shelters. In one encounter you see Vera confronting her mother as she injects herself with drugs. Shouting at her mother to stop it, you can hear Jean screaming back angrily, "It's no use. I can't do it. I will never change."

In calmer moments, Vera herself would face the camera and allow her fears to escape her much-wounded heart, "I can't do this anymore. It's killing me." St. Paul said that the way to salvation is to remain "In Christ." For Jean this way went through Vera. Slowly and painfully the pleas of Vera began to heal the woundedness of Jean's heart, and Jean began to believe in herself, and that freedom from drugs was possible. The documentary was an explicit witness to the redemption of Jean through the determined patience of a loving daughter longing for the homecoming of her prodigal mother.

DAY 21
CHURCH ON THE STREET
WHO IS THE SAINT?

There are some sounds you just don't expect to hear downtown. Police and ambulance sirens intermingled with fights and screaming are commonplace, but as I passed a darkened lane, I heard the soothing sound of someone singing the 1929 chart topper, "Tiptoe through the tulips." I was really not supposed to be passing that lane. I had made a detour from my normal route to try to talk with a lady I had seen who was negotiating with a potential client in a car. It was while on this detour that I was being invited to "Tiptoe through the tulips." From the shadows there emerged a young lady, and when I complimented her on her singing she said, "It's my favourite song. It makes me happy."

"My name is Deacon Robert, do you live around here?" With that simple question, the words and emotions tumbled out of her as if some carefully constructed dam had burst.

"I'm Jen, and no I don't stay around here, I'm homeless. I was brought up Catholic and I had wonderful teachers. I still remember all their names, but I got in with the wrong people and made bad decisions. I feel so guilty about the decisions I have made in my life, and I feel I can never be forgiven. Pray for my mother so that she can forgive me. I hurt her so much because I was not a good mother to my children. She can't forgive me, my father can't forgive me, my aunts and uncles can't forgive me, my children can't forgive me. None of them will talk with me now. Do you think God can forgive me? People all say I am a sinner. Why will they not give me a second chance? Everyone deserves a second chance, don't they?"

I looked into her eyes, eyes that were beginning to well up again as if the guilt and hurt of her life was about to break through in a torrent of tears. “We both believe in Jesus,” I said, “In my life I need a second, third, fourth, in fact many chances, and Jesus always says, ‘Yes, you are forgiven.’ Please believe me, you are forgiven. You have to try to forgive yourself too. With that, I handed her my card and invited her to call or email whenever she needed support. “The Church on the Street” she said, looking at the card, “that’s brilliant. I love that. So, the church is here walking on the street with me?” “Yes,” I replied, “and I meet people like you who are the church too, waiting here on the street. I have seen many people on the street over the years, and there are some that have a spark in their eyes, and I know they will make it. I see that in you right now. “Really, you do?” she whispered. “Yes really” I said. At this her smile blossomed and she said, “You made my day. Thank you. Can I walk with you, or are you embarrassed to walk with me?” As we made our way back through the downtown area, I assured her I was not in the least embarrassed. “I am worried about the world,” she said, “So much hate. We all live in the same world, as if we are all in the same apartment building. Why do people hurt one another? I think everyone needs a good foundation of belief, like a Christian foundation. She told me she writes plays and poetry and I said that it is my belief that we need more artists in the world like her, because they help us all to see the beauty in life.”

When we reached my car I asked, “May I pray for you and give you a blessing?” “Yes of course.” she said, “Please pray that my mother and children will forgive me, and that we can be together again. I know it will take time, but you have given me hope to try again.”

Pope Francis once said, “No one learns to hope alone.” I think this evening both of us found new hope, and as we parted ways, she left me wondering who really is the “saint?”, and who ministered to whom.

DAY 22
CHURCH ON THE STREET
GORDIE

Several years ago, at 3 am I received the simple text message, “Gordie has passed. May he rest in peace.” To know Gordie was to know a man who at times had the tenderness of a child, and yet who could erupt into violence if he felt threatened, or as often happened, if he felt that street justice had to be delivered swiftly. A complex man whose story was part of a TV documentary which spotlighted the work of Rev. Harry Nigh and the Dismas community in supporting high risk offenders when they were released from custody.

In the documentary, Gordie walks into a dilapidated Victorian house where he grew up in Toronto. In the shambles of the living room he reminisced about his childhood which seemed to reflect the chaos of the house. “Me and my sisters called this the house of disrepute. Hookers would rent rooms to entertain their clients, and there was always lots of drugs and alcohol. I remember so much anguish and suffering in this place right here.” Then staring at the camera, before lowering his eyes as if ashamed, he said, “We were neglected and left to our own devices. I started to run around as I got older, and there were bank robberies, hostage takings, and drugs. My whole life has revolved around being in prison, and I carry memories of what I had to do to survive. But something happened to Gordie along the way.

The video showed Gordie sitting in the office of Rev. Harry Nigh, the Community Chaplain for Correctional Services Canada, a couple of years after Gordie had been released from prison. They were discussing the changes that had come into Gordie’s life since Harry introduced him to the Dismas Fellowship. He had slowly started to learn to forgive others, but the one he still had trouble facing was the man he saw in the

mirror. Gordie was still haunted by the hurt he had put others through and could not forgive himself for that. He would tell of one bank robbery in particular, “I can still remember the terror in the eyes of one of the tellers. I wish I could meet her again and tell her how sorry I am.

At one point in the documentary, Harry leans over and says to Gordie, “There’s a crumb on your shirt, let me shake it off,” and softly Gordie replies, “I am a crumb.” Then, as if he could see a glimmer of hope, he said, “If I had died a few years ago, would anyone be at my funeral? Nope. If I died today is anyone going to be at my funeral? I know there will be others present, including my family that I have found again.” Over one hundred of the Dismas community were there to celebrate what Gordie’s life had meant to them. They were a ragtag group of those who had done time, indistinguishable from those who have never darkened the inside of a prison; all there to bid farewell to our friend Gordie. His lifelong wish had come true, to die a free man surrounded by friends.

We reminisced and sang Gordie’s favourite hymn. It was clear from the lyrics why this one was his favourite. “Like a bird from these prison walls, I’ll fly away. No more cold iron shackles on my feet, I’ll fly away. I’ll fly away, O Glory, I’ll fly away. When I die, Hallelujah, I’ll fly away.” Rest in peace Gordie, my dear friend. Amen. spirit"