

## ***Sexagesima Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins***

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What does spring mean to you? For some of us, it signals the end of curling season, and the beginning of golf. For others, it is that interlude in between ice fishing and regular fishing. For some, spring is full of promise - a new Baseball season, or a new season of growth and the possibility of a good crop. For many, the first promise of spring comes with the arrival of the seed catalogue, and they are already planning their garden. Today's Gospel is much like that seed catalogue. It comes with the promise of a spring.

The answer which probably does not come first to us, and the association which we might not make so immediately, is that spring means Lent. Lent comes every year in the early spring, and its name comes from the word "lengthen." It refers to the lengthening of the days at this time of year, the slow, gradual and determined victory of the light over the darkness, day by day.

These three pre-Lenten Sundays, with their odd names -

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Septuagesima, Sexagesima, and Quinquagesima - are more treasures of our tradition. They form a bridge from Epiphany to Lent. Having considered the manifestation of God in Jesus Christ, and our end in that glorious vision, we consider how we must prepare for that vision. 1st John 3.3 says: Everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

So Jesus' parable sets before us the necessity of the preparation of our souls for the sowing of the saving Gospel, just as the soil must be prepared for the sowing of the seed. In that parable, it is only the good soil which has been broken up, has had the rocks removed, and has been weeded. There in a good, honest and patient soul, the word of the Gospel may be received, take deep root and bring forth fruit. Honesty, goodness, patience...these are necessary.

There are four cases in the parable. The first is of those who, though they hear the word, never receive it. I would assume that most of us here, in some measure, have received that message of God. But we do know how quickly Satan tries to distract us, tries to keep us from believing the word and being saved. The second case is of those who, while filled with

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fervour for a while, fail the test when it comes to temptation or adversity or suffering. Again, in some measure, we have known this struggle and we are still carrying on. If our faith is to survive adversity, then we need to get deeper, stop living and believing and praying on the surface, but get honest with God and with ourselves.

But the third case, surely this fits us best of all. This is our common error and fault. Here are those who have heard and received the word and who have held fast, but whose loyalties are divided. They have not made a clear choice for Jesus Christ and are fence sitters, those who, as Elijah says, go about limping with two opinions. This is the fudge we often attempt, too. We try to make religion secondary - a part of life, an instrument, a means to something else. We ignore Jesus' radical demands and warnings. We want to have it all, to serve God and mammon, to keep all our hands and feet and eyes and to enter the kingdom. But he says you cannot.

Is this your situation and mine? Those in the parable are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life. These are the weeds of our souls, and unchecked, they will take over and

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choke out any real and beautiful life and productivity there. Are you choked, suffocating under the burden of countless anxieties, concerns over money, and frustrated by a lack of pleasure in your life?

Jesus speaks elsewhere of those whose hearts are weighed down with the cares of this life. This word translated “cares” means also “distractions.” Our souls are distracted. They lack focus and purity. Now of the three things Jesus’ mentions here, this is clearly the less grave offence, and often the more serious problem for our souls. Think of Martha, weighed down with much serving. Even our service, our ministry, our work in the Church can be a distraction from that first call to hear and receive the word, from our relationship with Jesus Christ. So anxiety over food and drink and clothing and even tomorrow is an enemy. Instead, we are to seek first the kingdom of God and trust him, our Father. The antidote against anxiety, the weapon Jesus has given us, and the precious gardening tool he provides to dig up this weed, is prayer. To weed properly, you need to get on your knees. To weed out anxiety from your soul, you need to pray. “Have no anxiety about anything, but in

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everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. Philippians 4.6

Riches are not bad in themselves, but if we have anything of them, we must not set our heart upon them. It is the love of money, covetousness, which leads to all kind of evil. You cannot serve God and mammon. You may well use mammon, but you cannot serve it and serve the Lord God. How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. What does Jesus say to those who have wealth? Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. The riches of this life can choke us, they come to own us and not we them, and the pursuit of them consumes us. But our Lord Jesus has given us a tool with which to check these weeds as well: Alms. It is by giving away our riches that we free ourselves from their poisonous and thorny embrace. Alms means the faithful, and cheerful, and generous giving of our substance, for the maintenance and mission of the Church, and for the relief of the poor, needy, abused and neglected. This is the precious tool

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Jesus gives us to clear out the weeds of our soul.

Finally, our Lord warns us of the pleasures of this life. Now, in all three instances we are talking about legitimate things. The cares of this life, about food and drink and clothing, providing for your children, what you will live on in your retirement, these are legitimate. So the riches of this life - money and houses and clothing - these are all good things, in most cases, necessary things. So here, the pleasures of the life that our Lord refers to, are legitimate ones. But even these can choke out the growth of the word of God in our souls. This pursuit of worldly pleasure is incompatible with the service of Jesus Christ. Listen to Paul's warning to Timothy. 2nd Timothy 3 says: But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of stress. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, fierce, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding the form of religion but denying the power of it. Avoid such people.

Now, that passage is worth reading and rereading for many

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reasons, but I want especially to draw out for you the phrase: “lovers of pleasure, rather than lovers of God.” These two are opposed to one another. Here again, Jesus himself has given us the tool to weed our soul of this noxious plant. It is fasting, considered most broadly as self-denial. In fasting, in forgoing certain legitimate goods for a season, we realize our moral weakness, and we free ourselves from the hold of these things, that we might return to the free and grateful enjoyment of them.

Lent is coming, and your soul and mine are a mess. We need to break open our hearts, and go deeper, much deeper. And you and I need to take up these ancient tools, given and commanded by Jesus himself: prayer, alms and fasting, that we might clear our souls of those weeds, the cares and riches and pleasure of life.

The seed is the word of God, and that seed of the gospel is sown here today. It is that God came in Jesus Christ to save us. The Son of God became the Son of man, in Jesus born of Mary. And in our flesh and blood, he lived and died for us, offering himself as the sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. He took our place, that we might take his place in heaven. He rose again,

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soul and body, triumphant over death, and has gone into heaven to prepare a place for. He will come again and he has given us the pledge of his Holy Spirit, his power and presence in us. This seed of the Gospel is sown here today in word and sacrament, and I pray that we might hear and receive it, and then in goodness and honesty and patience, it may bring forth fruit in our lives, glorious beautiful fruit to the praise of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.