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The Seventh Sunday of the Year (B)

We are now but a few days away from the great season of Lent, the time for us to dedicate ourselves anew to living as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

There are many today who question Christianity and its followers. Why would anyone follow such a man? Why would anyone - especially priests and religious - voluntarily choose to "give up" so much of what is good?

These are very good questions for us to consider, especially throughout the season of Lent. Why do I follow Jesus Christ? Why do I - assuming I do - seek to live faithfully adhering to his teachings? Why should I keep his commandments at all?

In the end, the answer is simple: either Jesus Christ is God, or he is not. If he is not God, then we need have nothing to do with him. But if he is God, then our very existence belongs to him and our happiness is found in him alone by observing what he says.

In the Gospel today, Jesus demonstrates - in both word and deed - that he is indeed the Lord God. The scribes are quite right when they ask, "Who but God alone can forgive sins" (Mark 2:7)? Only God can forgive sins for says, "It is I, I, who wipe

out, for my own sake, your offenses; your sins I remember no more" (Isaiah 43:25).

In response, Jesus begins to show them that is, in fact, God and that he does have the authority to forgive sins. He asks them, "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, pick up your mat and walk'" (Mark 2:9)? Why might say the first is easier, for it requires fewer words; but we would be incorrect. It is easier to tell a man to pick up his mat and walk, for he might be able to so. To say to someone, "Your sins are forgiven" would require that he actually be able also to forgive the sins, otherwise he would be a liar.

When Jesus says to the man, "Your sins are forgiven," he also demonstrates that what he says has happened. This is why he says, "But that you many know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins on earth ... I say to you, rise, pick up your mat, and go home" (Mark 2:10-11). Jesus, the Word made flesh, God himself, accomplishes what he says, and he wants to do the same to each of us (cf. John 1:14).

Before we enter into these solemn days, the Lord says to us, "[S]ee, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it" (Isaiah 43:19)?

What new thing is it that the Lord is doing? For him, it is nothing new at all, but what he always does. For us, it is

indeed something new: the Lord is calling us to remember him, to cease our forgetfulness of him.

The Lord is calling us to himself that we might confess our sins and be restored to health. Yes, do you not perceive it? Do you not feel the call of the Lord resonating deep within you? Do you not feel something stirring within you, some deep desire that you cannot seem to satisfy? Of course you do! That is the longing within you that you have for God; it is God himself calling to you: "Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

In our forgetfulness of God we have turned away from him and abandoned him and have offended him greatly by our sins. But though we forget him, he does not forget us. He says to us: "You burdened me with your sins, and wearied me with your crimes. It is I, I, who wipe out, for my own sake, your offenses; your sins I remember no more" (Isaiah 43:24-25).

Christ Jesus came among us to fulfill these words when he said,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord (cf. Luke 4:18-19).

He has come to free us from the slavery to sin which weighs us down.

Our sin has robbed us of the heavenly riches, of that pearl of great price and that treasure hidden in the field (cf.

Matthew 13:44-26). But God himself has come to us to restore our inheritance, the joy of our hearts and the fulfillment of our every desire, "for however many were the promises of God, their Yes is in [Christ]" (II Corinthians 1:20).

To do so he has entrusted his Sacraments to his priests who act in his name, making his ministry present in every age and place. In Baptism and Confirmation, the Lord Jesus has "put his seal upon us and given the Spirit in our hearts as a first installment" (II Corinthians 1:22). In Reconciliation, he continually offers his merciful love to us, saying again and again, "Child, your sins are forgiven" (Mark 2:5). In the Anointing of the Sick he says to those who are made whole again, "Rise, pick up your mat and go home" (Mark 2:11).

Before the glory of Christ was fully revealed, the people said, "We have never seen anything like this" (Mark 2:12). This is precisely because, in Christ Jesus, the Lord has done something new!

Let each of us then prepare well for the solemn season of Lent, that we might humbly come before him, saying, "Lord, heal my soul, for I have sinned against you" (Psalm 41:5). Let each of us turn to the Lord, to him who is faithful (cf. II Corinthians 1:18), and renew our dedication to live for him alone. Amen.