

# Along The Way

With Bishop Matthew H. Clark



It is difficult for me to remember experiencing a more enriching Lent — and since I was a boy Lent has been special to me.

In God's good providence and through the power of His spirit you have made it so as you and people like you offered your spiritual gifts to our common celebration. Those gifts you presented in service, prayer, encouragement and sometimes. I am sure, in ways none of us will know about until we're all with God.

When did you do that?

When you sat up most of the night to offer hospitality to the homeless who without your goodness might have frozen in the wintry streets, you sparked in all of us a new appreciation of baptismal service.

Your Thursday morning sharing with friends of the fruit of your prayerful reflection on God's Word gave strength and life to the Church and remains with us as a renewed call to keep our hearts open to God in all circumstances.

The gifts of coin and heart you made to the hungry through Operation Breadbox reminded us that Christ lives in and among his people, and that the most basic statement which can be made about a brother or sister is that he or she is beloved of God.

And what did you think was happening in your spirit and in ours when you cooked for your family at six o'clock when your energy supply kicked out at four-thirty?

What about the time when you were stung by disappointment and dealt with it in such a way as to offer joy and mercy to the many who care about you? Did you remember then, or, if not, can you appreciate now that in such moments the loving, merciful Christ is alive in His people? And that in such moments we are vessels of His mercy.

And did it ever cross your mind when you worked so hard on your school play that you were offering the gift of recreation to those who were able to enjoy your efforts? Isn't that a wonderful thing to remember about yourself? — that you were helping to bring new life to friends whose faces you couldn't even see beyond the footlights? Thanks to star and stage hand.

Think a moment about the afternoon you gave to the Easter Seal Telethon.

Or the day you gave to the Diocesan Pastoral Council or about staffing the church parking lot in the freezing rain on Palm Sunday morning. Or the prayers you have been offering for the peace of mind, good health or freedom of someone you love very much.

It's difficult, I know, for you to think about some of these things. People like ourselves are not quick enough to acknowledge the beauty which is ours and the good that we do.

It may all be part of a distorted concept of humility that can be such a drag — an anchor on our capacity to be vessels of the Lord's love for His people. We're inclined to think that, if we speak of such things — or even if we think about them — we are making too much of ourselves. When we do that we clam up. And when we clam up we talk about the weather and politics and sports and sex. Those are all good things but Easter life calls us to more.

That call is to contemplate and respond to the life of the Risen One made ours by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Its transforming vitality joins us to the Lord in such a way as to make our love a participation in His own and our service born of that love a living sign of His compassionate presence to His people. "Where love is, there is God."

There is something more in this than a late 1970s/early 1980s self-affirmation, self-help, quick-guide-to-happiness statement.

It is a profession of Easter faith in Him whose mercy reconciles and transforms us into new life. And it is in the mystery of Him who is risen that we find the importance of recognizing His loveliness shining in us and in our sisters and brothers.

To have eyes and ears and hearts for the goodness of ourselves and of others is to have an attentive spirit for the very presence and goodness of God.

A friend wrote recently, "Goodness is something so much deeper than talent or ability to do a work. I mean goodness — God-ness if you will — the ability to love others very freely and without judgment or personal expectations, simply because they are His creation, His children."

To illustrate what she meant she very kindly shared a moment important to her and her family:

"We all need to have the happy quality my mother had. The week after she died we were all exchanging stories about her, and we discovered that each of us had always felt sorry for the other seven, because we each knew, for all our lives, that we were her favorite child — and that without a single parenting course!"

That tender memory provides something of a model for the Easter prayer of the Church. We gather to remember and tell the story of all of the wonderful things God has done and still does for His people in Christ.

And our hope in prayer of the Easter season is that we might carry more vitally in our hearts and express more graciously in our lives what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and what our hands have touched — Jesus alive in His people through the power of the spirit.

In the spirit of our call to this kind of Easter life, let me recommend for your consideration a simple and practical way of prayer which I hope might be of help to you.

During the sacred days of Holy Week and through the fifty days of the Easter Season, I ask you to reserve a brief period of time toward the end of each day when you can be relatively peaceful.

Begin those moments with a quiet request for an awareness of our loving God as He lives and moves among His people and especially as He has revealed Himself to you through the persons and events, the service and prayer, the joys and frustrations of the day.

When you have made that gentle effort to give your heart to the Lord, then allow the memories of the day to come back to you.

Let the memories be specific and concrete and very real. It might be a beautiful face or a shapely leg; it could be a tragic or apparently senseless incident; it may be a line of music or the image of a young child determined to complete a task no one thinks he or she can manage.

It could be the joyful look on the face of the lovely person you were kind enough to visit; it might also be the coldness which steeled the eyes of the person in whom you caused hurt.

Whatever comes to you, let it be. Don't rush anything; don't change it; don't fight it; don't force it.

Just let it be real in your heart in the merciful company of the Lord who loves you so much.

When you allow whatever is real to rest in you it will begin to draw from you whatever it is you wish to say to the Lord.

If it leads you to praise the Lord for His goodness or compassion, then do that in any way you are led to do it. If you have words to say, speak them but remember that silence also communicates.

Your grace may be one of sorrow leading to conversion. If your memory of the day places you in touch with the need for a change of heart, remember that the Lord died and rose to do that — just ask for that favor.

It can happen that what you remember leads you to speak the name of another person to the Lord. When you do that you give a gift beyond measure to that person and to all of us.

Or you may be content simply to say thank you — words which prepare the heart for further gifts, words which help us to give freely what we have freely been given.

The concern is not that we accomplish a great deal. We want only to be with the Lord who loves us and in His presence to appreciate the many ways He nourishes our Easter life in the course of daily living.

When you have finished, you may wish to pray the Our Father very slowly. It is an appropriate way to sum up our prayer. Or, especially toward the end of the day, you may wish to sing or recite a prayer to Mary, a rich tradition in the prayer of the Church.

How long a time? Whatever seems good to you. Try ten minutes for starters. (Think of it this way — that's about the number of commercial minutes in a half hour television program!) You may want to go longer. Be easy on yourself on the general principle that it is better to extend than to cut short.

Some persons find it helpful to write a brief summary of their prayer each day. Part of their preparation for the Sunday Eucharist is to review the experience of the week with the help of their notes. It can be a helpful way to bring life to the Eucharist, and the Eucharist to life.

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“Anyway, dear friends, it's only a suggestion. If it seems helpful to you, by all means try it. If not, pray in any manner you may prefer. Whatever the way, please pray for me and I shall thank the Lord for your goodness each day during the Easter Season. I wish Easter peace for you and all you love.”

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