

For the past four weeks, we have moved through the first chapter of the Gospel of St. Mark.

We heard Jesus' first words in that Gospel: "Repent and believe in the Gospel!"

Next, He drives out a demon from a possessed man – in a sense, confronting evil directly.

Last week, He healed Peter's mother-in-law, and then everybody was looking for him.

And today, He heals an outcast who has leprosy – bringing this person back into the community.

What St. Mark is doing through his recounting of these events in Jesus' ministry is giving us a blueprint for all of us on how we are to repent ... so that we can believe in the Good News of our salvation.

On Wednesday, we will begin the Holy Season of Lent with Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday is a day of fasting and abstinence from meat. Then the next seven Friday's are also days of abstinence from meat; the final Friday being Good Friday which is, like Ash Wednesday, also a day of fasting.

Fasting, of course, means that we are to only have one large meal on that day. No snacks between meals. And two smaller meals, the sum of which is not bigger than the large meal.

If you're older than 59 or younger than 18 – you aren't obliged to fast. But everyone over the age of 14 should abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and all the Fridays in-between.

On Ash Wednesday, we will hear Jesus' words again: Repent and believe in the Gospel.

We've already heard that repent means to have a change of heart. And over the last three weeks St. Mark gives us three foundations to base our change of heart upon.

First, we must confront the evil in ourselves. Like we pray in the *Confiteor* prayer, we need to confront any evil in our thoughts, words, actions and omissions. What we think affects who we are. What we say affects what others may think about us. What we do, or what we fail to do speaks volumes about who we are as Christians. So the first step in repenting – changing our hearts – is to confront whatever in us is evil.

Second, we must be willing to be healed. This means more than physical ailments or injuries. People can carry around emotional burdens, and historical baggage which get in the way of ever changing everything. We can be veritable hoarders of past hurts and offenses. If we truly intend to repent – to change our hearts – we need to let go of these things and allow the power of Christ to heal us.

Finally, we must be willing to be part of the community. In the first century, lepers were outcasts who had no relationships with anyone. They were abandoned by their friends and their families. In healing the leper, Jesus restores not just his physical health, but his standing as a person with relationships. If we are going to embrace repentance – to truly change our hearts – we need to work to restore and repair our relationships with others.

And so, the groundwork is set for us to begin Lent. To repent and believe in the Gospel.

As we approach this altar to receive the Sacred Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ, let us pray for the graces we need to enter into the Holy Season of Lent. May we allow Christ's power in our lives to cast off anything not from God; to allow His love, mercy, and grace to transform and heal us; and restore us to our fellowship with each other and with the saints.