

Archbishop Smith: Icy Underfoot

Walking in Edmonton is not for the faint of heart these days. Recent above-normal temperatures, followed by below-freezing ones, have left our streets, sidewalks, and trails covered with ice. Footing is unsure, to say the least, and signs abound warning walkers and runners of the danger of falling. In one attempt to get outside recently, I was following one of my favourite trails, and came across a very steep downward slope, covered with sheer ice. I didn't need any sign to tell me that it would be very perilous to attempt it, so I turned around and stayed on portions of the path that were secure.

This experience played in the back of my mind as I pondered the Gospel text from St. Mark proclaimed on Sunday (cf. Mark 1: 14-20). There the Evangelist gives us the very first words preached by the Lord Jesus. Among them is the command to repent. In this summons, the Lord is calling us to turn around, to change our way of thinking and leave behind the perilous conditions caused by the "ice" of prideful self-reliance. Many are the falls we can take if that is the surface on which we take our stand and try to move.

A much safer path, in fact the only sure one, is that formed by faith. Indeed, the very next imperative spoken by Jesus is the call to faith. "Repent," he says, "and believe in the good news." The point of "turning around" is actually to "turn toward". By the act of faith, we turn our lives in their entirety toward the Lord Jesus and stake everything on his love for us. This doesn't mean we shall not encounter the occasional slips and slides, but it does mean that the Lord will hold us by the hand so that we do not suffer a fall that proves ultimately injurious to our salvation.

I'm writing these thoughts on the feast of the conversion of St. Paul. His experience adds a nuance to what I've been saying here (cf. Acts 9:1-22). Sometimes, a fall is good for our souls. But only if the Lord himself occasions or allows it. Paul literally fell to the ground when the Risen Christ encountered him. This short tumble represented for him a lengthy plummet from error to truth, from pride to humility, and from blindness to sight. There are moments in the life of every disciple when the Lord intervenes and allows what I will call here a "salutary stumble" to help us realize the very dangerous ground we have been attempting to tread by walking on the ice of self-assurance. These eye-opening moments can be very painful, yet are granted as a wonderful grace that aims at moving us to a sincere repentance and an awakened faith. We all need these from time to time. Something to pray for, actually.

Out on the trails I am noticing an increasing number of people using walking sticks or poles for support. Smart. It helps them to stand upright in slippery conditions. On Sunday (which was Word of God Sunday), Pope Francis asked us always to have with us a copy of the Bible. Even smarter. Walking conditions, even along the path of faith, can often be hazardous for reasons not of our own

making. God's Word enlightens our path, alerts us to dangerous conditions, and enables us to move in safety, if we but listen attentively and follow faithfully where it leads. Let's be sure to read at least a few verses of God's Holy Word each day, and allow ourselves to be upheld by its wisdom and truth.