

Archbishop Smith: The Annual Checkup

It is that time of year again for that annual check-up we call Lent. This is a checkup of the spiritual kind, an examination of the soul.

When we go to our annual visit with a medical doctor, it often happens that he or she will send us for further examinations. The objective is to “look within” to see what is happening inside the body. This glance into the interior happens through blood tests, x-rays, CT scans and the like. The aim, of course, is to achieve a thorough and accurate diagnosis, so as to set out a plan for healing.

But what about the soul? Now, there’s a question we don’t hear posed quite often in popular discourse. There is no shortage of discussions around physical health and how to improve it. Yet, that dimension of our lives which must be healthiest of all – the soul – gets no attention at all.

Lent reminds us of the need for the spiritual checkup. It calls to mind that the soul grows very ill indeed when attacked by the virus we call sin. Here, too, an interior examination is required, but no lab test or x-ray will give us the information we need. The light that fully exposes our inner truth, and which points the way to both diagnosis and healing, is the Word of God. There we find all the elements of a good medical examination: symptoms, diagnosis and the way forward to healing and prevention of recurrence.

With regard to symptoms of a spiritual malady, we are invited by the Scriptural passages proclaimed on Sunday to take a look at how we speak and act. From Sirach: “When a sieve is shaken, the refuse appears; so do one’s faults when one speaks.” From Jesus: “for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.” What is the quality of my speech? Do I disparage others? Do I use foul language? Do I gossip? These are symptoms that point to an inner problem. We also hear Jesus say, “how can you say to your neighbour, ‘Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye?’” Am I living with a critical judgmental attitude toward others and not paying sufficient attention to my own need for healing? This, too, is symptomatic of a spiritual problem that needs attention.

As to diagnosis, we are given this repeatedly throughout Sacred Scripture. The disease is sin, the refusal to live in accord with the teachings of Christ and the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and the choice to follow instead my own desires. The remedy is God’s mercy, which restores us through forgiveness.

To help us prevent recurrence, Jesus poses a question that should awaken in us much reflection: “Can a blind person guide a blind person?” In so many ways there is a blindness to truth and goodness that inhabits us. This can arise from inexperience, from lack of formation or, indeed, from sin. As we acknowledge our inability to see, we recognize the need for a guide to lead us along the right path, but following someone of equal blindness will get us

nowhere. Yet, this is what is happening to us in so many ways. We choose to follow the multiplicity of "blind guides" that reach us with their messaging through the modern means of social communication. Anytime a person or message leads us away from the Word of God, we have the proverbial situation of the blind leading the blind.

The Word of God is incarnate in Jesus Christ. Only he can lead us in life; only with the help of his grace can we hope to avoid a recurrence of the disease of sin. This Lent, let us allow Jesus, the divine physician, to examine us closely by His Word, and then accept gladly and thankfully the medicine of his mercy and his help not to sin again.