



**“Those who do what is true come to the light”
(Jn 3:21)**

Reflections for Lent from the African Jesuit AIDS Network (AJAN)

Lent: a time of prayer and Christian justice

Our reflection for the fourth Sunday of Lent (15 March) is written by Dominique Lare Kasso SJ. He runs the Information, Education and Listening Centre (CIEE), which is an HIV prevention-education program that is based at the University of Bangui in Central African Republic.

“Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”
Mt 7:7-12

Our actions are always prompted by some motivation, vision or ambition... If we want to “come to the light”, then we need to have an inner disposition that leads us to conversion, and to adopt attitudes that are rooted in our efforts to convert. Lent is a good time for such a conversion.

Lent is also a fitting time for us to prune our desires: a time when we humbly accept our condition as finite creatures and opt for a simpler lifestyle as we come to terms with our limits. Our starting point, then, is accepting ourselves for what we are. The inspiration for all this is our Lord Jesus. Like Jesus, we should lean on prayer and on values such as the justice featured in the reading from Matthew.

In this passage, Jesus talks to us about the need of the power of prayer and of the kind of justice that we may call Christian justice. We will be unable to understand Christian life unless we have a relationship with God, and prayer is at the heart of this relationship. We are living here on earth as pilgrims, but prayer brings us closer to God, opening the doors of his immense love and giving us a foretaste of the delights of heaven. Likewise, Christian life is a constant searching: *Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.* (Mt 7:7)

Prayer occupies an important place in the life of those who rank among the most vulnerable. This is so for many people living with HIV: prayer is a source of hope that helps them to

cope with the stigma and discrimination they face in their communities. When I ask some about prayer, they reply that prayer is a time when they raise their eyes and look upon the glory of Jesus Christ. We know that each one of us lives in Him. Fortified by this hope, we should be able to look around us and to recognise and understand the signs that Jesus is indeed present among us. This is what we are called to do in Lent.

In the same reading of Matthew, we find one of the most well known declarations of Jesus: the so-called Golden Rule. Let's see what it's about.

In this text, God reveals Himself as good and generous to those who turn to Him in persevering prayer. Likewise, His children should show generosity and kindness in their dealings with others. This passage is also interpreted in a different way, by those who prefer to see the Golden Rule as a sort of summary of the exhortation not to judge others, which appears a bit earlier: "Do not judge". It is not possible to know exactly when, in his discourse, Jesus spoke the words: *Do to others as you would have them do to you*. However we can still confidently affirm that the essence of the Sermon on the Mount, that is to say the justice that the Christian should show in his relationships, leads to the Golden Rule.

Today, there are many who break the law of justice, and this has an impact on the most vulnerable, among them some people who are living with HIV. If we look to Jesus Himself to set an example for us, then why do we still hold back?

People with HIV continually see their rights trampled, in a world where AIDS is increasingly viewed as a matter of human rights, especially where access to care and treatment is concerned. Just think about Africa, where it is imperative that the international community strives to protect the rights of people with HIV, not least because vulnerable groups still face mountains of difficulties to access services of prevention, treatment, care and support. In this continent, as elsewhere, the struggle against AIDS is closely linked to public health and socio-economic development and this link is part of the dynamic that ties HIV to human rights.

In this scenario, we hear Jesus telling us: *In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you*. This beautiful line calls us to shared action for people with HIV. The question of justice is no longer limited to the political level but is also relevant for the grassroots level of society. If I need treatment for my health, why should someone else be discriminated against? Where is the Word of God falling on rocky ground today?

Let's hope that all those who have a political mandate or who belong to civil society, at whatever level, take a stand and speak out without waiting to be asked, take action and use all the means at their disposal, however modest they may be, so that the state of affairs and mentalities will shift.