

For years, Fr. Abbe Pierre was voted the most popular man in Paris, as he was renowned for his humanitarian work.

Born into a prosperous and devout Catholic family in Lyon in 1912, from an early age he was inspired to follow a religious life and in 1930 joined the Capuchin monks. He eventually left due to ill health and became a priest in Grenoble. In 1942, he joined the resistance and helped to hide Jewish members of the community from the Nazis and Vichy police. Eventually he was arrested but managed to escape and fled to North Africa to join the Free French led by Charles de Gaulle.

In the post-war period he became a member of the French national assembly, but didn't see himself as able to achieve much. He was struggling in his spirituality too. In fact, at one point, he was a priest and he wanted to die. With World War II and years of fighting with the resistance had left him physically sick and spiritually drained. He was supposed to be a spiritual example for others; and yet the empty victory and endless anguish of the Paris slum left him without faith, hope or a will to live. Police had routinely summoned him to the bedsides of those dying, and one one night he was called to talk to a man who was about to take his life. He

found himself in a run down hotel on a stinking bed next to a man who was begging for pity. But he had none to give. He said to the man, how dare you expect me to help you when my own desperation is more than I can bear? Suddenly in the eyes of the beggar a flicker of interest. “Father” he said, you need help? Suddenly the old derelict put away his own torment and said “how, Father? Let me help.” And the priest was dumbstruck. Here was this beggar, a shipwreck of a man too feeble to fight for his own life but finding strength to reach out to someone.

Fr. Abbe Pierre, was never ever to forget that night in 1945 when he rediscovered his motivation for his own earthly mission; the need to be needed, and from that night he found himself again, and a legion of beggars began, and outcasts, the most distressed in slums of Paris into what he called the “Disciples of Emmaus” which is a society of beggars. It was something unique. He felt charity wasn’t about just writing a check or getting one from a person or the government, but when others would help themselves. The British based version of Emmaus says its philosophy is “Giving people a bed and a reason to get out of it.” And so, amidst the garbage, refuse and rags of Paris they found what they could to sell it to help those in need. And from that ministry began a ministry of the needy

helping the needy, serving first those who suffer most. They would spread to over 27 countries in the third and fourth world; work camps; and have a Harlem brothel converted into a home for the homeless just to name a little of what they do. The people who made up the organization were rag pickers; the ex cons in Rio; elderly in Chile; lepers in India; the lame in Rwanda; and orphans in Korea. Fr. Abbe Pierre's way was never let me help you, but you are needed to help someone more desperate.

But how did all this good that emerged begin? The answer is because in 1945 a would be suicide in a Paris slum revived himself to help someone else; an anguished priest, who was then inspired to teach that lesson around the world. Such is the power of grace in action; a person rising from their bed or their own needs to change and help someone else in need.

This weekend, we begin the season of Advent, one of joyful waiting in anticipation of Christmas. But it's also a season a bit like Lent in the sense that it is one of conversion, of spiritual growth. Jesus tells us to "be watchful, and be alert" because God is coming. The problem can be complacency; we can just drift from one day to the next. Saint Paul writes to the Ephesians, "Awake O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ

shall give you light.” His words are a rallying call, to get us, like that anonymous man who called Fr. Abbe to his bedside, to get us out of our bed.

This season is a chance to get out of the slumber; to re-engage with the urgency of changing and being transformed, recognizing that God put us here for a reason, and He wants to use us. So what are we to do to be transformed?

The starting point is recognizing what Fr. Dittberner stressed to us in that theology 101 class: we need a Savior. It’s why we sing “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” each Advent. Just as this is the darkest time of the year, darkness comes into our souls. We as humans are broken; sin impacts us all, and we need a liberation from it. God’s love and grace, through Jesus, is what helps us to rise from the bed. But we need to first be aware of our need for it. In our lives, inevitably we are like Fr. Abbe and that unnamed man; sin paralyzes us and can beat us down and change us. But what happens when grace enters the picture is an awakening. So we first ask for help, knowing that God will always come to us. Yes, he is a judge - and we

are mindful of that judgment. But that comes with love, the grace that sets us free.

Our first reading gives us a chance to kind of do some soul searching to see how we can be formed by that love.

Isaiah asks “why do you let us wander, O Lord, from your ways...” Fr. Abbe was on the straight and narrow path; he followed his call to a vocation; he served his country, but he got disillusioned. He kept going to help people who, he thought, did not want to help themselves. And because of seeing so much of this, he got lost. If you’ve ever known the feeling of being lost, it’s not a good feeling. So a good thing to do is ask ourselves am I getting lost in some aspect of my life? Maybe you don’t put as much into your job as you used to. Maybe you’ve fallen into some addiction and are lost in the temptations. Perhaps you’ve lost your way in terms of how you should love and serve your family, or live out your vocation. When we enter into that space of sitting with the word “wander” and placing ourselves like Fr. Abbe on that night in 1945, we can began to understand how to change for the better and of our need for a Savior.

Right after this Isaiah asks why our hearts are allowed to become hardened so that we do not fear God. God is there to shape and form our hearts; a hard heart is one that has become brittle. Returning to a favorite movie this time of year, It's a Wonderful Life, think of George Bailey, determined to go his way in the world, to do it his way, to be held back by no one, then realizing he has to take another path as he looks into the eyes of Mary and it's not about him, but about being formed by God and what God wants him to do with his life. Advent is a great time to reflect like Fr. Abbe did after that encounter, like Mother Theresa did on the train getting the "call within the call" to help the poor; like Fr. Damien of Molokai did when he felt the call to help the lepers on the remote Hawaiian island. Stubbornness can be such an obstacle to true spiritual growth. We need to say OK God, what do you want me to do. How do you want me to live my life? How do you want me to be a better parent or part of this family? Where are you leading me to go next? O Come, O Come Emmanuel and soften my heart we ask so it can be shaped.

Isaiah then says "behold you are angry and we are sinful." Reflecting on God's love for us and judgment, and what He wants us to do, we also reflect on what needs to go in our lives. Remember shame says there is

something wrong with us as a person; guilt when healthy says there's something wrong in my life that needs to change. For Father Abbe is was the bitterness and anger and apathy. Again we should not think of God as angry in the sense of being out to get us, but as an anger that is there to set things right. The anger of God in the Bible is a righteous, justified anger that leads to alienation; when the people sin there are consequences among them a sense of abandonment as the Israelites felt in Babylon. So when we think of God as angry, it's not an image of God we should run from as seeing as old-fashioned. Our parents loved us but would be angry with us for some of our actions, yet they always remained our parents. But just as when we lie, cheat, use hurtful language we can sense theres a wedge between us and our parents or family members, the same is true with God. Thinking about that, we can use this holy season to ask ourselves how have I put divisions between myself and God? What is it in my life that is causing me from loving God as I should? Use the season to go to confession; we have our penance service tomorrow night. Think about your struggles - perhaps you've got too busy to pray; you've become angry or bitter; you've allowed yourself to justify things you shouldn't be looking at online; you've not given others the gift of your time and attention and neglected God's words to love our neighbor. Recognizing what it is that

puts the separation between ourselves and God, we can then change for the better.

Lastly, we become people of action. Think back to last week's Gospel; the sheep were the ones who helped those in need. Service of the needy is service of Christ. Sometimes we can focus on our own problems quite a bit; and lets face it, this year we've had plenty to complain about. But as Fr. Abbe helped others to realize, each of us has the power to liberate; to serve the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those imprisoned. A man at the end of his rope helped a priest rediscover his vocation, and when we give others the gift of our time and our love, we in those actions are serving Christ.

As we look forward to Christmas, we will celebrate the historical coming of Jesus. But our lives are meant to look at that moment and remember what it means - God Himself coming into the world to dispel the darkness, a darkness as Fr. Abbe found can become so intense that it can be hard to see through. Let us use this season to open our eyes to the reality of God's love which is there to form our hearts into the people He wants us to be. Allow that to happen by not running from the past or the darkness in your

soul, but by getting in touch with the hardness that is in your heart, and be formed by the Master so we, like that man in Paris in 1945, rise from our beds of sin, and use God's grace and love to bring light, love and hope to the world becoming the people God wants us to become.