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Lent encourages us to seek mercy

“As the eyes of a maid watch the hands of her mistress, even so our eyes look upon the Lord our God until he have mercy on us. Have pity on us, O Lord!” With such words, the Book of Psalms speaks about trusting in God’s mercy. No matter how harshly we may have been denounced for guilty deeds, no matter how shameful the deeds were, no matter how low we has fallen, we should never despair.

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Will God have mercy? The example of Jesus forgiving Peter is probably the best example in the Gospel. Jesus was not only willing to show this disciple mercy. He predicted how it would happen. At the Last Supper, Jesus said, “Simon, Simon! Satan has got his wish to sift you all like wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. Once you have recovered, you in your turn must strengthen your brothers.”

There are some who reasonably ask: “How can you encourage someone to seek God’s mercy after such a person has caused so much harm to so many people? Sacred Scripture condemns those who have turned away from God. This is obvious in many texts, for instance, in the Letter to the Hebrews: ‘If, after we have been

given knowledge of the truth, we should deliberately commit any sins, then there is no longer any sacrifice for them.”

Christians debated this topic for almost a hundred years in the early Church. The debate was just as intense as the debate about circumcision narrated in the Acts of Apostles. Just as some were saying “circumcision yes” and others saying “circumcision no”, there came a time when some were saying Christian sinners can be forgiven, while others were saying they cannot be forgiven.

It was St Peter together with the other apostles, guided by the Holy Spirit, who declared that circumcision was not necessary. It was Pope Cornelius, in the fourth century, together with the other bishops—also guided by the Holy Spirit—who declared that Christians guilty of serious sin can be forgiven.

The practice of Lent, which begins on Ash Wednesday, is meant to encourage all Christians to be sorry for their sins. The logic is simple. We are all sinners, as St John says in his first letter: “If we say we have no sin in us, we are deceiving ourselves and refusing to admit the truth. But if we acknowledge our sins, then God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and purify us from everything that is wrong. To say that we have never sinned is to call God a liar and to show that his word is not in us.”

This article by Fr. Joe Babendreier first appeared in the Sunday Nation in March 2019.