

First Sunday of Lent March 05, 2017

Readings: Genesis 2:7-9, 16-18, 25; 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

During the season of Lent, the church invites us to examine our lives, to repent of our sins and do penance. By means of fasting, penance and prayers, the faithful obtain strength they need to overcome the sinful tendencies. The first reading of today introduces us to this Lenten theme by bringing us face to face with the concept of origin of sin. The Book of Genesis gives us the story of the creation of our first parents, their disobedience and the entry of sin into the world. God gave them all the good gifts but through their disobedience Adam and Eve turned away from God and accordingly lost their friendship with God. The passage from the Gospel of Matthew tells us of the victory of Jesus over the evil one in the desert. Led by the Spirit Jesus went into the wilderness, where he prayed and fasted for forty days. He was tempted three times and he resisted all the three temptations coming from the devil. These temptations indicate the victory of Jesus as he is told to be unfaithful to his mission. Matthew presents Jesus as the New Israel now in the desert. The Old Israel was tempted in the desert and failed but the new Israel came out victorious. The episode is the explanation of human temptations and with the grace of God we too can be triumphant in our battle against evil. In the second Reading Paul presents his dramatic contrast between Christ and Adam designed to highlight his central doctrine of Justification through Christ. Paul tells the Romans that sin entered the world through the disobedience of Adam resulting in death but the justification of human kind came through the obedience of resulting in new life to humanity.

Today's First Reading from the Book of Genesis tells us about the creation of our first parents and their disobedience to God. God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into him the breath of life. He created him in his own image and likeness, giving him knowledge and consciousness. Having created man as the supreme creature, God put every creation at the service of man. In his benevolence God created the human person as distinct from all other creatures on earth and placed him in the Garden of Eden. The Hebrew meaning of the word Eden is pleasure. The Garden of Eden was created to be a place of ongoing bliss for humans, a benevolent place where all their needs would be met. God also gave man a suitable life partner in Eve. God created Eve to complement Adam so that they may become one in the sharing of each other's happiness and that of

God. The passage also tells us of the tree of life or immortality and of the tree of knowledge, of good and evil created by God. The first parents were tempted to disobey God by the serpent or the evil one and break his command. The narrative tells us that they succumbed to the temptation and as a result, they lost the joy of the paradise experience. From now on suffering and death became part of their inheritance and the mark of original sin was given to the posterity namely to the entire human kind. What they received as the fullness of life and gift of love at creation was lost through their disobedience to God. From this time on their future includes hardships and eventually death.

The Second Reading from The Letter of Paul to the Romans provides us with a greater understanding of the nature of sin. The story of Paradise describes the disobedience of the original human couple. Paul begins his description of the status of the reconciled Christian by comparing it with man's previous condition before the coming of Christ. It is a comparison of Adam, the first parent, with Christ, the head of the new humanity. But it is not smoothly worked out; for Paul also wants to extol the superabundance of Christ's grace which now reigns instead of Sin and Death which had been in control of man since Adam's time. Just as sin came into the world through Adam and with it death entered the world affecting all people, so also through Christ uprightness came into the world and with it life eternal. With the disobedience of the first Adam death entered the human race, but we have received abundance of grace and new life through the second Adam, Jesus Christ. Paul specifies to say, "For just as by the disobedience of one the many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one the many will be made righteous." He stresses that the free gift of the grace of God received through Jesus far surpassed the outcome of sin. Hence there is no comparison between the free gifts of the grace of God versus the consequence of one's sin. While one's trespass brought condemnation, the free gift of God brought justification.

The Gospel Reading of today tells us that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he prayed and fasted for forty days and there he was put to the test by the Satan. The wilderness or the desert is a place of silence, solitude, fear and emptiness. We are uncertain about the place of his prayer and temptations but we know that he prayed a long time as he was preparing for his mission and was awfully hungry. The forty days and nights may be symbolic of the 40 years in the desert when Israel endured a time of temptations and failure. Now, Jesus, the

new Israel, is likewise being tempted in the desert and overcomes the tempter. There are the three temptations with three answers of Jesus and then an aftermath. The main focus of the study of course, is on each of the three temptations, to determine what the temptation actually was and how Jesus dealt with it. The introduction, the first couple of verses, tells us a couple of very significant things. First, that He was led by the Spirit of God into the wilderness. This is the same Spirit that descended on Jesus at His baptism in the form of a dove. Almost immediately this same Spirit leads him to the temptations. What it indicates is that it was the plan of God for Jesus to begin His ministry with this challenge. The devil could tempt Jesus with every power he had, but he would not succeed. The temptation episode was God's way of showing that Jesus was totally human, that He could resist sin, and that he could defeat Satan. In the aftermath of the contest we read how the devil left Jesus for a while and angels came and ministered to Him. He will come again to tempt him when he is on Calvary.

The gospel tells us that Jesus was tempted three times and each of the three temptations touches on Jesus' identity as the Son of God, which had been revealed during his baptism. "This is my Beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." The first temptation is to turn stones into bread. The tempter picks up the fact that Jesus was hungry, that he had not eaten for forty days. The tempter says that if he is truly the Son of God, he could command the stones to become bread. The tempter was telling him that he has a long mission ahead of him and he needs physical strength and he has the power of working miracles. He can work one for himself and can be strengthened for his ministry. These Words of Jesus mirror a passage in the Book of Deuteronomy. "He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors had ever known in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." To this Jesus responds through the words of Scripture that a person does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. Here Jesus is indicating that basic necessities should be subject to the revealed Word of God. His mission was not fulfilled by providing for basic needs but rather by proclaiming the Word that is life. The temptation was to turn His spiritual nature into a means of satisfying His material need without reference to finding the will of God. This would show that one does not live by bread alone, but by everything that God says and does.

The second temptation was to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the Temple and the Satan quotes from a psalm that says that God will not allow Jesus to be hurt. He will give the angels charge over him so that he will not dash his foot against a stone. Now it is the Tempter himself who cleverly quotes from a psalm which is a psalm of trust, telling how God takes care of his people. If the first test was in the realm of the physical, the second is a test of a spiritual nature. In fact, the test strikes at the heart of the previous victory. Jesus had escaped that temptation by showing that He was not just physical but spiritual, that He could accept the hunger and the weakness if it meant obeying God. And so Satan wants Him to do something spectacular to demonstrate that He is spiritually perfect. His sudden appearance in public place from nowhere will give evidence of being the messiah and his mission is complete. Jesus responds with a passage from Scripture, from the Book of Deuteronomy which says that it is also written not to put the Lord God to the test. This is the chapter in the Law that is foundational to Israel's faith. It exhorts the people of Israel to obey His commands and to do what is good and right before Him--but warns them not to test their God. The moment an individual puts God to the test that person gives evidence that he or she does not trust God. This refers to Massa and Meribah in the wilderness where the people murmured against God and tested Him because they did not believe that he could or would give them water. Hence Jesus responds to the Satan saying, he will not test God's word by doing something foolish or unnecessary. He will trust his Father in the direction of his mission. Thus the spiritual nature of Christ retained its dignity and lived out its quiet, confident trust in the Father.

In the final temptation is to compromise. Here the Satan took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed Him all the Kingdoms of the world and their splendor. Now this temptation is amazing in its boldness as the Satan tells Jesus to fall down and worship him as if he is the creator of the Universe. This temptation had to do with fulfilling the commission or plan of God with a shortcut, not following God's ways. Luke adds that Satan claimed he had been given these kingdoms and it was his right to give them to whomever he wished. Satan was saying to Jesus, "Look, you came as the king to inherit the nations. Here they are. Why go through the trouble of being the suffering servant to get to the crown. Give me one moment's homage and I will abdicate and all is yours." What the tempter offers is the human craving for power, fame and wealth. The mission of Jesus was to fulfill the call of the Kingdom and Satan shows him the easy way. Jesus absolutely rejects the offer and tells the Satan to go away from him. He once again quotes the Book

of Deuteronomy which says that every creature has to worship the Lord God, and serve Him alone and no one else. Jesus indeed has won over the subtle temptation of the Satan. It is the cardinal truth of Scripture taken from the Ten Commandments to worship God alone and no other gods. For the righteous there would not even be a thought of bowing down and worshiping the prince of darkness. He would receive the kingdom in God's time, and in God's way--by defeating Satan, first here in the temptation, and later at the cross.. And His will be a far better kingdom than this world could ever offer. In the aftermath of the contest we read how the devil left Jesus and angels came and ministered to Him.

In fact, these three tests are really symbols of real tests that we find in the life of Jesus. In reality all of the temptations can be summed up as temptations to power, pride and glory. The first temptation demanded that miraculous power be used to provide for basic material needs. The second temptation demanded that Divine power be used to produce a spectacular "sign" that would compel anyone to believe, leading to pride. The third temptation demanded the use of Divine power to establish a worldly Kingdom of God and secure glory. All the three Temptations can be summarized briefly as a suggestion of short cut by the Satan to be unfaithful to the call and mission of the Father. Jesus had the mission to save the world by his suffering and cross. The Satan shows the easy way and indicated how the same end can be met but he will not be following the way of the Father. Matthew in this temptation narrative shows Jesus as the new Israel. The old Israel in the desert was tempted three times when they asked for bread, when they grumbled when they did not have water and finally when they worshipped the golden calf they asked where the God who saved them is. God provided them with Manna in the desert, birds for their food, water that came from the rock. When they worshipped the golden calf he punished and later forgave them. Jesus is victorious in all three tests and will continue to do so all during his life right up to the moment of his death. He shows us the way how we too in our life can be tempted and how we can overcome the temptations in our life.

An eight-year-old boy approached an old man in front of a wishing well, looked up into his eyes, and asked: "I understand you're a very wise man. I'd like to know the secret of life." The old man looked down at the youngster and replied: "I've thought a lot in my lifetime, and the secret can be summed up in four words. The first is think. Think about the values you wish to live your life by. The second is

believe. Believe in yourself based on the thinking you've done about the values you're going to live your life by. The third is dream. Dream about the things that can be, based on your belief in yourself and the values you're going to live by. The last is dare. Dare to make your dreams become reality, based on your belief in yourself and your values." And with that, Walter E. Disney said to the little boy, "Think, Believe, Dream, and Dare."

The dentist's office is full of very expensive and sophisticated equipment. The high-tech gadgetry helps him to monitor possible problems with any one's teeth and treat whatever problems may arise with greater precision and less pain for each. But there's one dental-health issue that all the fancy equipment can't address: the results of not flossing daily. Standing in the middle of all that equipment, the dentist told his patient: "There's no substitute for running that piece of floss between your teeth." It's hard to believe that an action so simple can have such great effect. Sometimes in the pursuit of good spiritual health, we try to substitute complicated and advanced methods for the simple ones we have readily at hand. We may go to conferences or seminars to deepen our spirituality but neglect daily meditation and Bible study. There's no substitute for flossing, and there's no substitute for praying and reading scripture daily. Dear God, help us do the things that will bring us closer to you. Amen.

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