

First Sunday of Lent February 14, 2016

Deuteronomy 26:4-10; Romans 10:8-13; Luke 4:1-13

We are now into the great season of Lent. It is important for us to realise that our life is a journey, a movement towards God and to prepare ourselves to receive him fully. That we are pilgrims on the journey is what Lent is all about. 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 purpose of Lent is to provide that purification by weaning human persons from sin and selfishness through self-denial and prayer, by creating in them the desire to do God's will and to make his kingdom alive by making it first come into their hearts. The real aim of Lent above all else, is to prepare Christians for the celebration of the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The better the preparation for this day, the more effective the celebration will be. One can effectively relive the mystery only with purified mind and heart. The Church invites all to repent from evil ways and return to the Lord who is eagerly waiting for each one to come to him. Hence Paul in the second reading tells us that it is necessary for us and for our salvation to believe in Jesus and witness to him.

In the First Reading Moses speaks to the Israelites at the end of their forty years wandering in the desert and he prepares them for their new life in the Promised Land. He gives them an extended lesson on survival in the Promised Land. He was aware that he himself would not cross the river Jordan and without him they may even succumb to temptations that may be harmful to their spiritual welfare. He reminds them that in the Promised Land they have to rely on God as much as they did when they were in the desert. As a leader Moses gives them a preview of the wonderful experiences they would have in the Promised Land. Their forty years of wandering would now come to an end. They would not eat Manna; rather they will have the abundance of food, the produce of the land flowing with milk and honey. At the harvest time he called on them to bring the first fruits and offer them to God. Secondly it would be an opportunity for them to express their gratitude to God. He reminds them how they ended in Egypt to be oppressed by the people. But God was with them and built them into a strong nation and has led them to a land of blessing. If they only remain grateful to God, they would be secure in the Promised Land.

The Second Reading taken from St Paul's letter to the Romans tells us that those who believe in him will have no cause for shame, for the person in faith it makes no difference whether he is a Jew or a Greek. All belong to the same Lord who is rich enough and is concerned about each one of us. He will support us and when we ask for his help he will not refuse. Paul tells us that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. It is a scandal and a crime then people brings in the differences in caste and origin into the religion. Paul tells them that salvation is offered to all Jews and the Greek included. He calls on them to live a life of faith. Faith in Jesus and calling on his name in prayer leads all to salvation. Paul again quotes the Book of Deuteronomy to emphasise what a gift of God's word is. Heart and mouth refer to the internal belief and outward expression. The whole person must believe in and bear witness to the salvation brought by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Faith in Jesus and calling on his name in prayer lead to salvation.

In today's Gospel Reading, we heard how Satan tempted Jesus in the desert just before he began his public ministry. The Temptations of Jesus in the desert reveal to us the way in which the Son of God as the Messiah responded to the devious methods of the evil one. What the Satan proposes to Jesus is contrary to the will of the father and indicates the way in which human beings are generally tempted with. The purpose of the temptations indicates that all those who are called by God, be it an individual or a nation must be tempted in the desert. This was true of the Israelites and is true of Jesus the messiah who spent forty days in the desert. In the case of Jesus however he is fortified by the Holy Spirit who guarantees his success in the battle with deception. Jesus has just completed his forty days of preparation in the desert and he now faces one more test before he begins his mission. During his stay in the desert he had fasted and prayed and now he was hungry and certainly he needed strength before he started his ministry. Here Jesus shows how a person can conquer the evil one and remain triumphant and be at the service of God. In the early centuries this was a lesson to the catechumens to prepare themselves after the person of Jesus who himself was tempted.

Today's Gospel tells us of the triumph of Jesus in the desert. All the temptations Jesus undergoes in the desert call for the misuse of his power as messiah and Son of God. The mission given by the Father was to suffer and die and thus save the world. The evil one shows devious ways and wants Jesus to use his power to self-fulfilment and external show. Led by the Spirit in the wilderness, Jesus resisted the three temptations that were placed before Him. His temptations make it clear that Jesus was fully human as well as divine. The episode also tells us that what happened to Jesus will happen to us and we too can be tempted at any time.

Through Jesus and with Him, we are reminded that we too can be triumphant in our battle against evil. The temptations placed before Jesus highlight the kind of ministry and mission he is about to begin. It will tell us what kind of leader he is going to be. He will not be someone who offers instant gratification, one who looks as for all encompassing political power, or who dazzles his followers through his miraculous or dazzling powers. Instead Jesus will model compassion, gentleness and humility. He will be a servant leader who will not hesitate to wash the feet of his disciples. He will be a leader, a king on the cross.

Satan in the first temptation asked Jesus to manifest His Divine power was by commanding a stone to become a loaf of bread. But Jesus, at no time in his life, being God incarnate, had performed any miracle for himself. His miracles were for others. The Satan was aware that after fasting forty days he was hungry and he needed food for his physical strength. There would be no harm in doing a miracle so that he has enough strength to begin the ministry. It is a seemingly harmless temptation and it is easy for anyone to succumb to it. The answer that Jesus gave to the devil is very interesting. Referring to the Book of Deuteronomy, Jesus said, "One does not live by bread alone but by the word of God." God's word is the food and nourishment for him. His miraculous power is for others and not for himself. Hence there is no question of performing the miracle of bread. Jesus overcomes the devil's temptation by reminding the power of the word of God.

The second temptation is to worship the devil in exchange for power. The devil promises Jesus the authority over all the kingdoms and dominions. In the Old Testament when Israel was in the desert constantly tended to chase after false gods e.g. the worship of the golden calf. Here Jesus acknowledges his total trust in one God and his sovereign power. He tells the Satan to worship the Lord God and serve him alone. The final temptation is to test God by throwing himself off the parapet of the Temple with the certainty that the angels will hold him up without causing any harm. Israel tested God at Meribah in the desert to provide them with water but Jesus in turn refuses to manipulate God. He says: You must not put your Lord to God to the test. In each case Jesus responds with a quote from the Book of Deuteronomy chapter 8. That chapter is a warning to the Israelites to be faithful to their call and the mission particularly in times of prosperity. Jesus refuses to be diverted from his mission at any time. It is clear however that on the surface the temptations appear to be good and seem to produce well but contain the deception hidden through them.

The forty days of fasting in the desert reminds us of Moses doing the very same in the desert. At the end Moses received and proclaimed the message of God, the

Law, just as Jesus will go on to make his mission statement in the synagogue at Nazareth and tells people that he is the messiah, the fulfilment of God's call. Jesus used the scripture passages from the book of Deuteronomy to confront the attack of the evil one. Moses was the Old Israel who entered into the desert and remained there with the people for forty years. Jesus now is the new Israel that goes into the desert to pray before he commences his public ministry. The difference is that the Israelites together with Moses succumbed to the temptations in the desert but Jesus overcame the tempter. The temptations in fact are similar: the old Israelites cry for bread and God gives them Manna. Jesus is hungry but refuses to work the miracle of bread and lives on God's word. They make a golden calf and worship but Jesus refused the glory of the kingdoms placed before him and chooses to worship God. There is the question of the presence of God when Israel does not have water and grumble against God and Moses and God gives them water. Jesus is asked to test God's presence by jumping down the pinnacle of the Temple. He refuses to listen to the tempter for he is fully aware of God's way.

In fact, all the three temptations of Jesus are all rolled into one: to be unfaithful to the mission of the Father. The Father had given him the mission to redeem the world through his life, suffering and death on the cross. The Satan now shows him the easy way to fulfil his mission. He need not go the hard way but take the easy path. Jesus refuses to succumb to the temptations and takes the path of God. The last sentence of today's Gospel tells us: "The devil left him to return at the appointed time." The battle with evil was not over for Jesus. It will occur again and again at various stages in his life, right up to and especially at those last hours in the garden and on the Cross. For us, too, the battle against evil never stops. The selfishness, the greed, the anger and hostility, the jealousy and resentment, above all the desire are our temptations. Our only success in life can be what we achieve in building a society that is more loving and just, based on the message of Jesus, a message of truth and integrity, of love and compassion, of freedom and peace. Thus the tempter leaves him for a while and he will come again and again to tempt him during his life. This in fact is the human situation. We too are constantly led to the temptation and we can overcome this with the grace of God.

The Satan through these temptations tries to divert Jesus from his proper mission, which is that of leading all souls to the Kingdom of God. Jesus is the Servant of God par excellence: he is at the service of the Father who wants to save all men. Jesus the Man must always be at the service of the Word of God which is in him and to which he is united in an absolutely unique way. Nothing must divert him from this service. His kingdom is that of Heaven. He has said so: "My kingship is not of this world." These temptations serve to reaffirm the true identity and the

mission of Jesus. They show that Jesus sees himself in continuity with the heritage of Israel and acts accordingly. The encounters with the devil also manifest that there is a real conflict between the reign of God and the reign of Satan and it is a conflict over power. We encounter Jesus as a model who resists the temptation and shows the how can counter the power of evil. These temptations tell us that every person is tested in the desert. This was true of the Israelites, was true of Jesus and is true of every human person. The Evil One tempts us to be unfaithful to the call and mission. God has given to each one a mission and has given a call to fulfil it. Finally Luke tells us that Jesus is the model for resisting the temptations by being faithful and committed to the Gospel and refusing to put God to the test.

God appoints a certain time for everything. It is only when he decides to do a certain thing that it is actually realized, and not before or after. Now, it was not yet the time of God when the devil used God's own words, written in the Holy Scriptures, in tempting Jesus for the third time. It is true that God will charge his angels with taking care of Christ, but only when his hour has come. When Jesus will say to his Father: "Father, the hour has come; glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee..." (Jn. 17:1), that will be the hour of the will of God, and the Father will send his angels to his Son. In the meantime, Jesus replies to the devil: "You shall not tempt the Lord your God." That is, you will not try to make him act before his time. "And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time." (Lk. 4:13)

Jesus, the Son of God who was sent by the Father to be the New Israel, was also tested by the Lord. Jesus, throughout his life on earth, had to obey the command of his Father and reject the despicable suggestions of Satan. As the envoy of the Father, Jesus carries out, throughout his entire life, the command of his Father, the Creator of all things. But to the Word of the Father, whom the Son is in his essence and which he realizes in all his person, comes the temptations of the devil, sometimes visible and corporeal, as in the desert, and sometimes invisible and spiritual, as in the Garden of Gethsemane or on the Cross of Calvary. This is the reason why Christ vanquished the tempter in order to show us the new path. Today's message from the Gospel indicates the triumph of Jesus in the desert.

Bill was a notorious and troublesome boy in the class. The Teacher was always finding it hard to control him and it was disturbing the whole class. She was sad. One day as the boy entered the class he found the teacher writing something in shorthand and the boy asked her out of curiosity, what she was writing. She told him quietly that it was a prayer. The boy asked her whether God knows short hand and she said God knows everything and reads every heart. As she looked at the

board the boy took the letter and hid it in his book. After several years when Bill was a successful man when he looked through his past materials found this note and out of curiosity took it to the office to translate. The clerk told him that the note said: Dear God I am finding difficult to control Bill and he disturbs me. Please touch his heart. He is capable and he can be very good or very evil. Bill had tears in his eyes. He knew the prayers of his teacher were heard.

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