

## **First Sunday of Lent February 18, 2018**

Genesis 9:8-15; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:12-15

We are now into the great season of Lent. 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. In the first reading we have the story of Noah and the deluge that destroyed evil persons. At the end of the deluge only Noah and his family were saved. God then established a covenant with Noah and humanity. The rainbow in the clouds serves as a sign of this covenant. In the second reading we have Peter telling us how our Baptism unites us with Christ's death and resurrection. We are cleansed of all evil and made right with God. In the Gospel we have the Temptation narrative. After his Baptism, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the evil one. After his victory over the Satan, Jesus enters his public life to proclaim the message of the Kingdom of God. By this time John was arrested and Jesus commences his message of the Messiah.

The first reading of today introduces us to this Lenten theme by bringing us face to face with the concept of origin and effect of sin. Today's passage that gives us the story of great deluge reminds us of two facts: Man's disobedience and disloyalty to the divine benefactor who created all and presented all gifts of body and mind to humanity, and on the other the magnanimity and the infinite forgiving mercy of God. The narrative tells us about Noah and his family in gratitude to God for his protection offered a large sacrifice. God blesses Noah in words that recall the blessing given to the first man and woman at creation: Be fertile and multiply, and fill the earth. A new element is the fear of Noah and his descendants that will come upon all animals and reflects the dignity of humanity before God. Noah would have needed such

assurances and worthiness before God after the traumatic experience of the flood. God also establishes a covenant with Noah, his family and all creatures that came out of the ark. They have the promise that God will not destroy the creatures of the earth with a second flood. They are reminded that the service to God is the main purpose of human life. When clouds gather on the sky as it happened before the floods, Noah and his descendants have no need to fear. Among the clouds they will see the colors of the rainbow assuring them that God is mindful of them and of the covenant of life he had promised.

In the Second Reading Peter while speaking to the believers was comparing the sufferings of the Gentiles who had become Christians as against the sufferings of Jesus. Peter was telling them that since Jesus had triumphed, they would also triumph. Their Baptism was the pledge of their triumph for it gave them a share in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus we die to sin and are led to God. Just as Noah was saved by passing through the waters of the flood, so also, Christians receive their first installment towards salvation through faith in Jesus and their passage through the water of Baptism which cleanses us from sin and enables us to have a clear conscience. Peter told the Gentiles that Jesus suffered for sins once for all, and suffered for the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring them all to God. The sacrifice of Jesus was not just for a few, but for all of us, from the beginning of time until the end of time. He, who was sinless, took upon Himself the weight of our sins and allowed Himself to be crucified in our place so God the Father may be appeased. Christ died for us. Having died on the cross, Jesus resurrected. He was raised to Heaven and glorified by God the Father above all living creations. Having been glorified, Jesus no longer enjoys a physical body. He has been made alive in the Spirit. In his Spirit; Jesus went to make a proclamation to the spirits of those in prison. Jesus went and announced to them his glorious triumph over evil. He has overcome evil in its most diabolical forms.

After his baptism, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert where he remains for forty days. The desert is the place where people felt close to God and away from the distractions of the world. It is in the desert that the people of Israel received God's Law. It is in the desert God made his covenant with his people. It is there in the desert that God took care of Israel giving them food and water. It seems necessary then that those whom God calls including God's own Son must be purified by spending their time in the desert. The forty days symbolize the temptation of Israel

in the wilderness for forty years, Moses's experience in the desert, and Elijah's flight. During that time in the desert Jesus was tested by the Evil One. Mark does not tell us how he was tested but Matthew and Luke do. These tests are really examples of the kind of tests that Jesus was to face in the course of his public life, even on Calvary. However, we have to focus on the meaning and symbolism of the passage rather than its historical accuracy. Its purpose is to help us to understand the conflicts that were in Jesus' own life and which will also be found in ours too. Matthew and Luke tell us that the tempter asked Jesus to change stones to bread and satisfy his hunger after his long fast in the desert, asked him to jump down the pinnacle of the Temple to make a spectacular entry as Messiah, and called him to worship him and in return he would possess everything in the universe. They were the temptations to be unfaithful to God's call. Faced with such challenges, each time Jesus said a firm 'Yes' to his Father's way, even when it came to hand over his own life. Jesus did not allow himself to be subdued by Satan. The purpose of his coming to earth was to overthrow the worldly kingdom of Satan that had its beginning when Adam disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden. Jesus the new Adam overcomes the evil one and proclaims the proximity of the Kingdom of God. He tells his listeners that he himself is the Kingdom and they ought to listen to him.

The Gospel of today tells us that Jesus begins his public ministry in Galilee. In the Gospel of Mark Galilee is the favorite place of Jesus. His ministry was most successful there, he chose his first disciples from Galilee, and later he told the disciples that after his resurrection he would meet them in Galilee. However, Jesus did not begin his mission of proclaiming the Gospel until John the Baptist was arrested by Herod or he was handed over. The Greek verb used here by Mark is similar to that word referring to the passion of Jesus as he was handed over to his enemies. The implication from the start is that the fate of Jesus somehow foreshadows in that of John. Mark presents him as a precursor to Jesus, a person who prepared his way. It was in Galilee that Jesus proclaimed his first message of the Kingdom of God and this first sentence he spoke summarizes the first ten chapters given by Mark. Jesus here announced the advent of a new time, a new situation, a call for radical change, and a commitment to faith. God's time has finally arrived. This provides a new time frame within which everything that follows will happen. A new presence of God's reality is now at hand, a presence traditionally understood to have power and bring judgment. A radical response of change is called for, so radical that makes a person move in totally opposite direction. The Good News of

God's eternal plan for the elevation and redemption of human kind is presented. All of this is aimed towards a faith commitment to the gospel about to be unfolded by Jesus, the Messiah, and the Son of God.

Jesus began his ministry by proclaiming the message from God his Father. He told his audience that a new era is about to begin and a new relationship is being established between God and the people. He told them that the time has come which is the moment of fulfillment. The long awaited "Kingdom of God" was close at hand. That Kingdom is not a place, still less 'heaven', but the loving power of God, to which we are all invited to submit ourselves. It is the rule of God in the hearts of people. This Kingdom has arrived in the person of Jesus, our King and Lord. The presence of this loving power of God is evident in his teaching of the love of God, in his healing of the sick, in the liberation of people from all destructive forces in their lives, in the bringing back of the rejected and the outcast, in the forgiveness and reconciliation of sinners and finally in the supreme act of self-giving love shown in his dying for us. He invites all to enter that Kingdom through his personal call of repentance. This call is not just to feel sorry about our past; it is not just to stop the bad things we are doing now. Jesus was calling the people for a radical change in their whole way of seeing life and the world. In the words of St. Paul's it is to be a new person for in Christ and a person has to undergo a radical personality change. Jesus then put forward the practical way of entering into the Kingdom by believing in the Gospel. Not just believing that the Gospel is true but believing in what the Gospel says and more significantly believing the person of Jesus. This involves a total commitment to the way of life presented in the Gospel and a sharing of its vision of life. This will mean standing firmly to the values of Jesus and remaining faithful to him.

Today's Word of God demands a twofold response from people. This response is summarized in the reminder given to us on Ash Wednesday. One part of the response is a profound change in opening ourselves to the Kingdom of God and to determine the direction of our life. The other part of our response should be that we believe in the gospel, that we take Jesus at his word. In Jesus there has been a new beginning. God is once again going to re-establish his sovereignty in the world. He is going to win his victory over sin and evil. Lent as a time for repentance and we are called upon to repent and change ourselves

according to the ways of Jesus. It is a time to seek the face of God and to be strengthened in our belief. At the same time Lent tells us that repentance without belief is also bad, because it can easily lead to despair. Lent is a holy season in which the Lord wants to help us repent more completely and believe more deeply. Today's message from the Word of God clearly speaks of this triumph. The triumph of Jesus is a perfect message during the Lenten Season. It tells us that because of the triumph of Jesus by his death on the Cross, we can through him be triumphant in our battle against evil. Through our living in and with our community we learn the way of Jesus, we learn how to live in commitment to him. We learn to live a life based on truth, love, compassion, sharing, justice and freedom. We get support in living that life from the community of which we are a part. We learn to grow into a people who are whole and complete in union and harmony with our God, with others and with ourselves.

We are now entering into the great season of Lent, when we are called upon to spend six weeks preparing ourselves to celebrate the high point of our faith: the Paschal Mystery, the suffering, death and resurrection of the Incarnate God. This season is a time of penance, fasting and prayer. It is a way of purifying ourselves from our weaknesses and prepare ourselves to celebrate the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus with a renewed commitment to follow him. Even though we are no longer asked by the Church to observe the severe penances of former times, it is surely fitting that we make some form of sacrifice as a preparation for the great event. It should be a time for personal reflection on our personal commitment as Christians. Only a little reflection will convince us that, on the one hand, there are many ways in which we fail through word and action, through our thoughts and through our failure to be the kind of people that the Gospel challenges us to be. We are called to go forward and shine by our obedience, our servitude, our charity towards others, through prayers, sacrifices, all in the love of God. Let us prepare ourselves during this season of Lent to receive the Word of God with open hearts and lead ourselves to our Lord with purified hearts and ask him to make hearts the center of his kingdom.

The story is said about the Salt Doll which wanted to have a look at the Ocean and see for itself how big the ocean was. It had heard a lot about the ocean from other dolls around him. So it set on its great mission and first encountered a lake and it asked whether it is an Ocean. The lake

said that the Ocean was much bigger and it was but so little before it. The Salt Doll then met the river and asked whether it is the Ocean and river said no but it would ultimately join it. Further the doll went traveling and finally came face to face with the Ocean. It asked the huge mass of water whether it was the Ocean and it got the reply that it was indeed the Ocean. Then the Doll asked the Ocean how it could believe it. The Ocean replied and said if it really wanted to know, then it should come forward and touch it. The Salt Doll went forward slowly and stepped into the ocean. Immediately it noticed a change in its person. Its toes were missing. It shouted at the ocean and said that it had cheated the doll. The Ocean smiled and replied that if it really wanted to know him well it has to be one with him. The Salt Doll smiled and made a decision. It slowly entered the Ocean and soon was melted into it. Then it said, now I know what the ocean is; I am one with it. That is the reason why the Ocean is still salty in taste.

Fr. Eugene Lobo S.J. Bangalore, India