



## 1st Sunday of Lent



**Date:** Sunday, March 5, 2017 | **Season:** Lent | **Year:** A

**First Reading:** Genesis 2:7–9, 3:1–7

**Responsorial Psalm:** Psalm 51:3–6, 12–13, 17 | **Response:** Psalm 51:3a

**Second Reading:** Romans 5:12–19

**Gospel Acclamation:** Matthew 4:4b

**Gospel Reading:** Matthew 4:1–11

**Preached at:** the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

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I think today in the readings we are being asked not to forget. This past Wednesday we all came together to receive ashes and mark the beginning of Lent. The Church offered two statements as the ashes were imposed. The first was ‘Repent, and believe in the Gospel’, which I preferred as the two verbs, to me at least, better represented Lent as an active time and one that alluded to Lent being a preparatory time before we celebrate Easter. But there was another that could be used: ‘Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return.’ There the verb is to remember, to not forget. This is meant to remind us of the first reading we heard today. The New Revised Standard Version actually says “then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life”. In Hebrew, the word ‘formed’ has a meaning that is closer to the word ‘sculpted’. I think to be sculpted is an image that contains much more care than being ‘formed’ but the point is that we remember that without God, we were dust – and all too easily blown about. But we should also remember that God breathed life, his spirit, into us – into each one of us. So we remember that we are more than just bodies –we have souls that animate our life and set us apart from the other creatures.

The first reading continues to explain how God created a garden for man and woman to live in, creating trees for food, life and knowledge of good and evil. And it is in the second part of the First Reading where we find the story of the fall – and a large part of it, like the Gospel, is dedicated to the conversation with the Evil One. The Serpent is the tempter, Satan, who can only lie and deceive.

The conversation is set in that garden of Eden, in that garden that provided all our needs. We are asked to imagine this paradise of Eden, teeming with life, with various trees to satisfy every hunger of our body and soul. There Adam is established as God's son and servant. But when he is tempted, he lets "his trust in his Creator die..." as the Catechism puts it. Instead of remaining content with what God provided, man is tempted by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Now Scholars tell us that this was not so much a moral awareness of right and wrong, since man possessed that from the beginning as a rational creature, but it was rather more the legal authority to determine what was right and what was wrong, what was good and what was evil. But that authority can lie only with God. Both ate 'the forbidden fruit' and both disobeyed God, as they succumbed to temptation. And so it happened as Paul says, that "through one man sin entered the world", and not just sin, but death as well.

In our Second Reading Paul connects the first reading and the Gospel by proposing that we look at Jesus as the new Adam. Just as death entered the world through the old Adam's sin, Paul says, life has been restored through the new Adam's sacrifice. There are a lot of parallels between these readings. Whereas in the first reading, the old Adam was tempted in a place that teemed with life, in the Gospel we see Jesus being tested in the desert, that place where every hunger goes unsatisfied because there is no life. A Jesuit I used to live with once wrote that "Jesus, the reconciler, is led to the unforgiving desert. Jesus, the bringer of peace, is confronted and tempted by the father of fears, and the prince of lies. Perhaps it is precisely because the desert is fearful and unforgiving that Jesus must go there. For God's reconciliation to take place the fearful and the unforgiving must be faced. It is fear and a lack of forgiveness that makes reconciliation necessary."

It was in the desert that the tempter engaged Jesus in conversation, as he did Eve in the garden. But Jesus, trusted absolutely in God's word, and he withstood the devil's temptations. And so it happened that through one man, God's true Son, sin was overcome. Now in mentioning the 40 days and 40 nights, the Evangelist is also wanting to evoke in us a memory of the Exodus account, when God led his chosen people out of slavery into the wilderness and where they wondered for 40 years but afterwards they received the gift of Torah that placed them in a particular relationship with God, resulting in their religious identity – God's chosen people.

In the Gospel reading, we heard how the devil questioned Jesus' identity, who Jesus really was, and he attempted to thwart God's purpose for him. We can recall that the previous episode in Matthew's Gospel account is the baptism of Jesus, when Jesus' relationship to God and his identity are affirmed in the voice from heaven that declares: This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Immediately after this the Devil comes and tempts him, twice, "If you are the Son of God" ... prove it. He is trying to get Jesus to doubt God. The three temptations, to satisfy appetite, to defeat death, to be like God, ultimately disguise the underlying temptation that Satan is tempting Jesus with. That temptation is to forget who he is.

The temptations that Satan uses with Jesus are trying to test his faith in God. But Jesus affirms his allegiance to God though his worship and his Jewish faith, which rested heavily on remembering the Torah – the Scripture – and what God had promised his people, and what he had personally communicated to Jesus at his Baptism. Jesus' relationship with God we can see is marked by reliance, trust, and allegiance and a commitment to God's purpose for him. In not forgetting this purpose, and who he was, Jesus was able to withstand temptation. So the devil is not merely tempting Jesus with material satisfaction and worldly power, but he is encouraging Jesus to forget who he is, to surrender his identity as the beloved Son of God, and to give up on his divine purpose. And he does exactly the same with each one of us when we are tempted.

When the evil one tempts us, he is wanting us to forget who we are. He is wanting us to forget that we have a greater purpose, a higher calling. He wants us to forget that we are already in a relationship with God – that through our baptism we have been claimed for Christ and that God will provide for our every need. Like Jesus and the Jewish people, each one of us has been given an identity derived from God's gift of life and love for us. God gave us bodies and souls – and we should not misuse God's gifts.

Lent is a time to remember that we are in a relationship with God and, as beloved children of God, we are a part of God's plan and purpose for the world. This Lent, how will we allow Jesus to conquer sin in our own lives? What must we do to remind ourselves that we are all sons and daughters of God, that we are not only in a relationship with God, but also with each other – not just with the other who is my friend, but also with those whom being in relationship with can at times be difficult, like our in-laws, the foreigner, the exile, the poor, and

whomever is Other in our lives. Let us also remember that we are in a relationship with the garden God provided us with, our planet earth. Let us pray that each one of us can restore and return to right all our relationships this Lent.

So as we heard on Wednesday, let us repent, and let us believe in the Gospel, the good news that yes, we were lovingly sculpted into existence, and provided for. Every new day is a new beginning. May our Lenten penance help us remember our relationship to God. And may our trust in God, be strengthened and renewed.

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