



1st Sunday of Lent



Date: Sunday, March 10, 2019 | **Season:** Lent | **Year:** C

First Reading: Deuteronomy 26:4–10

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 91:1–2, 10–15 | **Response:** Psalm 91:15b

Second Reading: Romans 10:8–13

Gospel Acclamation: Matthew 4:4b

Gospel Reading: Luke 4:1–13

Preached at: the Jesuit Institute in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

On Wednesday this week we all gathered to receive ashes and were told to ‘repent and believe in the Gospel’ or to ‘remember that we are dust, and to dust we shall return’. Repent, Believe, Remember. These are good things to do during Lent as we prepare ourselves to celebrate Easter. Lent is a useful time and can be a joyful one as well because it is a definite moment where we can pause and reassess our lives and so repent and return to God. In doing this we will be able to celebrate the Resurrection at Easter better, with deeper faith, greater hope and more moving love, because we will have reconnected with our faith and with God. We can do this more easily if we remember that we are God’s beloved.

During Lent we test ourselves, by traditionally giving up something or taking something on, not for its own sake, but so as to stretch ourselves as it were, Godward. Our Lenten sacrifices are not mere duties, but should be catalysts for entering into a deeper relationship with Our Lord. In fact, the point is not so much to give up something, but to give up ourselves. To reposition God at the center of our lives and to remind ourselves that we are not the center of the Universe. In this way, helping others or denying ourselves something is a way in which we can physically and tangibly remind ourselves that it is God to whom we should be directed and to whom we should return to. This is most easily done by realising and remembering how much God loved us, and what He endured for us. The point though is not to dwell on the suffering – but on the love of God.

So at the start of this season of turning towards God, Jesus offers us his own examples of being tempted. I think this is significant and helpful because – at least in my own life – whenever I try to go on retreat – to go away for a few days to pray and get closer to God – it is at those precise moments that I am suddenly tempted more strongly than when I am not consciously trying to pray. Wise friends have told me that this is to be expected because the Evil Spirit, the Tempter, wants to stop people from entering into relationship with God. So perhaps the first temptation this Lent is that we do not enter into it well, or at all. We need to remember the words of Jesus who told his disciples to: ‘deny themselves and take up their crosses daily and follow Him’ (9:23). Lent is an opportunity for us to pick up our crosses, to resist our temptations, and to remember God’s love for us.

But let’s look at those temptations – ours and those we hear about in the Gospel.

For ourselves, as I said, we might be tempted not to even start. Or having made a good start, we find ourselves defeated and so desiring to give up. We might give into the voice that tries to tell us we are not worthy. Let’s remember that Jesus having just received the Holy Spirit after being baptized by John, and being told that he is God’s Son, “the beloved”, He was led by the Spirit through the wilderness for 40 days. In some way this reminds us of what we heard in the first reading – of how the Jews escaped Egypt and wandered for 40 years in the Sinai Desert before being reoriented back to what we now know as Israel. Whilst in the desert they were put to the test, but they kept failing even though they were being formed to receive the promised land and become God’s chosen people. As we hear in the first reading:

“the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; 9 and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Deuteronomy 26:8-9 Here we see God’s desire fulfilled for his people and that we need God’s help because if we try to do anything by ourselves, it will ultimately fail. The point of the tests, the temptations, is so that we abandon our own will and rely more on God’s grace – which is always generously given. Let’s recall the words of the 2nd reading: “ for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Can we accept God's help in this? Can we ask for it? If we try to live as if we are in charge and we need not rely on God, then we might find ourselves – hopefully not for 40 years, but that has happened before! – stuck in the desert of testing... or giving up after just beginning. We need to pray, this Lent, for the grace of perseverance. Because we will be tested many times.

Jesus, we hear is tested three times: to satisfy his appetite, to defeat death, or to be like God. Or in other words, Jesus is tempted with materialism, power and glory. These are archetypal temptations. So what is going on here?

The temptations that Satan uses with Jesus are trying to test his faith in God. But Jesus affirms his allegiance to God through 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, though they come in many forms, ultimately underneath he does exactly the same with each one of us when we are tempted, he is trying to make us forget our own giftedness and belovedness by God.

But let us notice that sometimes we need to receive material help, we need to use our own power and we need to recognise the glory of God in our own lives, for are we not all made in the image and likeness of God. One of the Church Fathers said that the glory of God is the human person fully alive. We cannot give God glory if we live an existence that is a shadow of what God desired for us.

We would do well to remember how Thomas Aquinas reminded us how sins can be in excess, but also in deficiency. How are we tempted. What are we being asked to forget about ourselves? Very often it is easy to belittle ourselves under the pretext that we cannot be any good – but is that true? Let us not deny ourselves the dignity and the remembrance that we are sons and daughters of God. Whilst rightly putting God at the center of our lives, let us celebrate the gifts and talents and agency that God has gifted us with, and let us not abdicate those precious gifts to the Evil Spirit who is only wanting us to forget who we are. We are

not ‘doormats’ to be trampled over in some false sign of humility. Satan 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.

So, Lent is a time to remember that we are in a relationship with God and, 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 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.

Amen.

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