

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT, B
TEMPTATION: OUR WEAKNESS AND OUR STRENGTH

“The Spirit drove Jesus into the desert and He remained there forty days and was tempted by Satan” (Mk. 1: 12)

The word Lent means Springtime. It refers to the season of the beginning of the lengthening of days. A sign that the cold dark winter is receding giving way to the brightness and beauty of springtime and summer. Lent from this perspective is a season of hope, not a time of gloom and despair. Though we walk with the crosses of our penance, we look forward in hope of the Resurrection of Christ, our Saviour. Christians are men and women of hope at all times. Lent is a time we go into ourselves to experience that inexplicable love of God for us. When we are drawn more profoundly to the reality that “God loves the world (me) so much that He gave His Only Begotten Son” to die for the sake of the world (for my sake). This season invites us to a loving response to the proclamation of Joel on Ash Wednesday: “Come back to Me with all your heart” (Joel 2: 12) through prayer, fasting and almsgiving. It is a time to renew, restore and rekindle our relationship with God, by mending all broken cords within ourselves, with our neighbours and with God. It is a time we give up things that prevent us from being or becoming who God created us to be; to give up things in order to come closer to God; to give up things so that we are constantly reminded of our desire to be like God. What are you giving up?

Our Lenten journey began on Ash Wednesday when ashes were administered on us, reminding us of our creation from are dust, and inviting us to a life of repentance. Because of covid-19, the Church instructed that the ashes should be sprayed on the head rather than signed on our foreheads by the priest. Thank God, there was the option to improvise other means of safety. In our parish, we used a cotton bud per person to mark the cross on the forehead. The ashes tell a story, our story, the human story from creation. But deeper than that, the ashes tell the story of our susceptibility and frailty. It symbolises the fact that we are all vulnerable in the face of temptation. Man lost his glory and paradise because he failed at the first temptation. And since then, even after we have been redeemed, humanity has not devised a full-proof strategy against the antics of the Ancient Serpent nor against the impulses of our innate desires.

Therefore, on this First Sunday of Lent, as we embark on this forty-day walk in the wilderness with Jesus, the Church draws our attention to the greatest enemy of our efforts - temptations. As Christians, who at this time, “take up battle against spiritual evils” (Collect: Ash Wednesday), we are even more confronted with temptations as the Ancient Serpent prowls round to lure us from our Godly desires and mission. We are constantly at war with ourselves to combat our tendencies to sin and with the evil one, to reject his glamorous seductions. The temptation of Jesus demonstrates the fact of His humanity: that Jesus descended into the depths of the perils of human existence to experience his brokenness. If the Son of God, Who Himself was God could be tempted, how could we expect to be spared this seduction of our raw humanity? But what must we do? How can we, weak creatures be expected to be holy as our Father in heaven (Lev. 11: 44); Matt. 5: 48; 1 Pet. 1: 15-16)?

“The Spirit drove Jesus into the desert and He remained there forty days and was tempted by Satan”: All the synoptic gospels, much to our surprise, tell us that the Spirit, after descending on Jesus at baptism, led Him into the desert “to be tempted by the devil” (Matt. 4: 1; Mk. 1: 12; Lk. 4: 1). This could be understood as an inner struggle for fidelity to the will of the Father and against the frailty of His human nature. To save man, Jesus has to enter into the drama of human existence in all its weakness so as to experience his natural limitations. This is our daily struggle to conquer ourselves and to give ascent to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Recognising this inner struggle against the self, this “thorn in the flesh”, St Paul cries out in complete surrender to the power of God’s grace (2 Cor. 12: 5-10; Rom. 7: 14-20). There is always, and there will always be, that lullaby of the evil one to lure us apart. At such times, St. Peter exhorts us: “stand up to him, strong in faith” (1 Pet. 5: 8). We must know that our human efforts are so incapable of fighting off this Ancient Accuser and Prankster, therefore, we take Jesus as our model in our battles by familiarising with the Word of God so that it would always serve as our weapon, as it was for Jesus.

The desert recalls many images and events in the Old Testament. For as Adam and Eve were driven “out of the garden” after being tempted, Jesus is driven “out into the desert” to be tempted. The desert, the barren wilderness, now becomes the place of reconciliation and victory, as opposed to the garden, the flourishing paradise, that was the place of separation and failure. The desert is known in the Scripture as the abode of the powers of Satan symbolised by the lurking predatory

beasts (Lev. 16: 10; Isa. 35: 7-9; Ezek. 34: 25). Here Jesus faces the same challenge as Adam and Eve in the garden (Gen. 3: 1-6) and the children of Israel in the desert (Ex. 15: 25-16: 4). But unlike them, Jesus stands above the trickeries and falsehood of Satan determined to do the Father's will. There is also the desert of our lives: those parts that we have allowed the evils one to gain access and easily seduce to fall; those appetites that we find difficult to control; those sins we commit with the easiest ease. These constitute the deserts that could possibly cause us to fall. We lean on the shoulders of Christ, Who conquered Satan to give us the grace to fight courageously against these weaknesses that drag down our spirit.

For forty days, Jesus was tested. The same with the number of days of Lent. Very significantly, the number forty reminds us of the forty years the children of Israel wandered in the desert to the Promised Land. Lent symbolises our journey to freedom from the slavery of sin. Forty days of the flood of Noah to wipe evil from the face of the earth, after which God made the Covenant with Noah: "The waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all things of the flesh" (Gen. 9: 15). Moses spent forty days up on the mountain to seal the Covenant that God made with the children of Israel (Ex. 24: 18); Elijah travelled for forty days to get to the mountain of God (1 Kings 19: 8). The people of Nineveh had forty days of grace before the wrath of God would descend upon them. These forty days are our days of grace to seek God's forgiveness through repentance.

My dear friends, now is the "favourable time." Let us embark on this journey convinced that we do not walk alone. He Who called us has promised to walk with us, and he is always faithful. Let these words of the Apostle Paul encourage us: "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it" (1 Cor. 10: 13). Temptation may reveal our weaknesses but it could bring out our strength when we rely on the grace of God.