

1st Sunday of Lent (A)
(Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7 / Matthew 4:1-11)
09.03.2014

The Scripture readings proclaimed this morning have us think of beginnings: the origins of the human race with Adam and Eve and the new beginning inaugurated for all by Christ.

Our first reading from the Book of Genesis (literally, the Book of Beginnings) had us look to the story of our first parents and especially their Fall from grace; their loss of freedom and well-being. The gospel passage read led us to recall the initiation of Jesus' earthly ministry which began with His time of retreat in the desert.

Let us look at the two Bible texts from which we are invited to draw inspiration as we set out on our Lenten journey in the hope of making a fresh start with Christ during this season of grace, a time to live a new beginning.

First the story of humanity's origins.

In the Genesis story everything starts off well.

We are told how God fashioned man and breathed into him His own breath of life, making him become a living being. To begin with, the story exudes an aura of life and happiness, well-being and harmony. We are told how God established our first parents in a beautifully planted garden, surrounding them with trees that were good to look at and whose fruits were good to eat. Literally, everything was pleasant: truly pleasing to see and taste. The atmosphere was one of contentment. All was well.

We are told that as He created God saw everything He made to be good and that He saw humanity not just to be good, but *very good*.

All in all, God had provided a perfect environment for the first people. Theirs was an ideal situation in an idyllic setting. They lived harmoniously, enjoying the life given to them to share together, in the lush garden God had created for them.

But, before long, things began to unravel and fall apart.

Our first parents lost their good relationship with God and their good relationship with each other.

This happened when Eve succumbed to the temptation to doubt God's goodness and the honesty of His intentions for humanity's well-being.

The serpent came along and questioned God's motives. The serpent questioned God's intention in setting boundaries on Adam and Eve. The tempter implied that these boundaries were not for humanity's good and, if only they dared to violate them, then things would be even better for them than they already were.

This was a lie as our first parents were soon (but too late) to discover.

When Adam and Eve succumbed and overstepped their God-given boundaries they were overtaken by sentiments of guilt and shame; they lost their sense of well-being, the harmony between them turned sour, their confidence in God, in each other and in themselves was broken.

Right away they became afraid of the Creator who had loved them into being and filled them with His own breath of life.

They also felt terribly vulnerable and exposed before each other.

Whereas before they had felt comfortable and at ease with each other, a malaise entered into their relationship. We are told that the first couple now sewed fig leaves together to hide their nakedness. Evidently, they could not bear to be seen by each other (and even by themselves) just as they were.

They needed camouflage.

Ever since the Fall of our first parents we have all been left to struggle with the ill that overcame them.

We also suffer from the malaise they first felt.

We are, all of us, men and women whose well-being is marred by sentiments of guilt and shame.

We are inclined to be afraid of God and too embarrassed to allow ourselves to be seen by others just as we are. By and large, we are also afraid and ashamed to look honestly at ourselves.

Of course, things have moved on, but not necessarily for the better.

We have become more ingenious with time. We have progressed (or digressed) beyond just wearing sewn fig leaves. We have found various coverings to hide our nakedness. We have put on many forms of covering. Feeling threatened and menaced, we have robed ourselves in many layers of armour, imagining that we thus protect ourselves. In fact, all we have really done is to give ourselves heavier weights to bear.

Lent is a time to try to get back to where things were before the Fall.

It is a time to throw off our encumbrances; it is a time to cast aside all that weighs us down and holds us back in our response to God's call to share in His own life.

During this season we are invited to find anew the freedom God offers us; we are called to find restored harmony with God and others and, even before that, within ourselves.

Through our reading of the Genesis story on this First Sunday of Lent, the call addressed to us is a call to recognise that we were loved into existence by the One who is love in Himself and who has given us His loving breath of life, His Holy Spirit, to animate our whole being.

Lent is a time to throw away all the things that hinder us and have us shy away from entering into relationship with God. It is a time to be freed from all that interferes in our relationships with others. It is a time to come to experience reconciliation and deep peace within ourselves.

If we are to arrive at this end we must begin by realising that the first rupture that exists in our broken humanity is the rupture which exists deep down within each one of us.

This brokenness which we carry within is the result of what we call *original sin*.
Yes, because of *original sin* each one of us is divided within our self.

Christ's mission is nothing less than this: to help us find afresh God's original blessing.

The invitation addressed to us is an invitation to allow ourselves to be recreated; it is an invitation to consent to God's life-restoring grace; it is an invitation to allow ourselves to be blessed.

At this point let me introduce some vital insights from the gospel passage we read this morning.

If our first parents succumbed to temptation in a lush and cultivated garden, a beautiful and indeed paradisaical environment, Jesus resisted the tempter's wiles in a rude and rugged desert, a harsh and stark environment.

It was the same tempter who had made our first parents fall that Jesus managed to resist.

We might ask: what was it that saved Jesus from falling into the trap into which Adam and Eve fell?

Well, Adam and Eve wanted to take a short-cut to happiness; they desired gratification without delay.

They foolishly believed the tempter's lie that one bite of the forbidden fruit would suffice to give them everything they wanted.

They were overcome by the tempter's wiles.

In contrast to Adam and Eve, Jesus stood His ground. He was rooted in humility. He accepted fully the implications of the humanity He was asked to espouse in order to save us. He resisted the temptation to take short cuts.

There is a lesson for us here.

We all long for happiness and fulfilment.

Where we sometimes (indeed, very often) go wrong is to want to take short cuts along the way.

The reality is that the road of life often takes us through painful places, we have to traverse rough patches as we journey along life's way. Of course, this is something we would rather avoid. And so it is that we allow ourselves to be lured off track by all kinds of lies and illusory promises. We are derailed by hopes of a faster and easier way to what we might call *the good life* and think of as holiness: life with God.

The call addressed to us is to follow the path traced before us by Christ.

It is a call to espouse and dare to accept all the limits set upon us by our human condition.

It is a call to journey humbly to the place to which God calls us . . . and that is simply to be content to be our self in communion with Him and with others – and to begin with those with whom He has called us to share our lives.

We need to beware of short cuts that take us even one step outside of God's will, for what will happen then is that things will start to fall apart around us; our relationships with others will deteriorate; doubt, suspicion, guilt, shame, fear and mutual accusation will enter in and destroy our peace and detract from our well-being.

All of this should show us how important it is for us to be vigilant.

The apostle Paul tells us that we need *to test the spirits*. What he is saying here is that we need to operate proper discernment around our own desires and intuitions, as well as the seemingly good ideas and suggestions others present to us as the right way to take.

We need to be vigilant not to give into our own desires to be the greatest, the best, the most highly acclaimed or whatever it is that tempts us away from the joy to be found in simply being our true self.

We are all so easily tempted to settle for false greatness.

When we do this, what we sacrifice is our freedom and indeed our very life. We may *gain the whole world but lose our very selves*.

What each one of us should want is to become our true self. Our whole desire in life should be to become the person God created us to be: the one in whom He delights.

Instead of going into hiding, camouflaging ourselves, in a bid to cover our shame, the challenge addressed to us today is to dare to stand before God and others and indeed our self, to begin with, just as we are.

This is what Jesus dared to do in the desert. He dared to live there those forty days and forty nights exposed, stripped of all human support and comforts.

In the desert Jesus resisted the devil. He ignored offers that were too good to be true.

Here He shows us something we all need to learn, but struggle to accept: namely, that there are no quick fixes in life.

The road we are called to walk can be a long and arduous one; it can be a rugged and narrow path. We may not find it easy.

The tree of life planted in the middle of the garden is none other than the cross.

And so it is that the road to life is always in one way or another, at one time or another, a *via crucis*, a way of the cross.

But, when we take it as we should, what we are given to experience, not only at the end of the journey, but also along the path we are led to walk in Christ's footsteps, is life, happiness and peace.

The fruit of the tree of life is medicine for our existential shame.

What we experience as we stand before the cross just as we are, naked, exposed and feeling vulnerable, is no longer guilt and shame, but deep peace and consolation.

The One who looks down upon us from the cross accepted to become naked, exposed and vulnerable, as we are, *for our sakes*.

He lived His passion and death to heal our ills, forgive our sins, take away our shame and blot out all our guilt.

What He lived for us there recreates us. It makes all things new. It offers us a fresh start.

The One who looks down upon us from the tree of life, the cross, knows us fully and loves us totally.

By His love for us He does for us something for us that we simply cannot do for ourselves: He saves us; He sets us free.

Although our first reading ends at verse 7 of chapter 3 of the Book of Genesis; that statement which tells us that *their eyes were opened and Adam and Eve realised they were naked*, I would like to conclude this morning by drawing to your attention something we find a little further on in the chapter under consideration.

In verse 21 of the same chapter 3 of Genesis we are told how *God Himself sewed together clothes for the couple out of the skins of animals and they put them on*.

Here God is shown to take away our first parents' shame and self-loathing. We should understand there that what He did for them, by that act of mercy, was to take away *our* shame and self-loathing also.

Richard Rohr sees this gesture as *God taking away the shame we carry by giving us back to ourselves – by giving us God!*

Rohr exclaims (and rightly so): *You don't get any better than that!*

May our Lenten journey see each one of us taking the journey we are called to take: the journey back to our true self.

May it see us open our hearts to the grace of God's healing, life-restoring love – which, it should be said, is revealed to us most often through the great gift of the authentic human love others have for us.

Amen!