

1st Sunday of Lent (C)

Deuteronomy 26:4-10 / Luke 4:1-13

06.03.2022

Few if any of us get life easy. Struggles of one type or another are part of our lot. We can find ourselves caught up in spiritual combats of various kinds; temptations of all sorts can assail us. Sometimes these may make themselves felt strongly. They can tire, weaken, and even completely discourage us. At certain moments, we can feel ourself to be *reduced to less than nothing*, akin to *a beast of burden brought to our knees, lying prostrate before the Lord* – as the psalmist puts it. When that is the case how important it is for us to remember these words of Scripture: *The Lord is ever faithful to His promise*; how important for us to recall that the Lord is there with and for us; that He *holds us by our right hand*; that He is ready to lift us up and renew us in His service and that of our brothers and sisters.

When we are severely tempted, it is surely consoling for us is to know that we are not alone as we struggle. Not only are *brothers and sisters throughout the world being tempted in similar ways as we are* (as St Peter assures his readers in chapter 5 of his first Letter) but (as we read elsewhere): *Christ Himself is with us when we suffer*. It is comforting for us to realise that Jesus is in solidarity with us. In chapter 4 of the Epistle to the Hebrews it is explained to us: *We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning*. In today's Gospel passage we are told how *Jesus (our great High Priest) was sorely tempted for forty days and forty nights*. We witness Him struggling alone in the Judean wastelands just before inaugurating His public ministry. We are shown how He overcame the adversity assailing Him during that time of trial *by the power of the Holy Spirit at work within Him*. The man Jesus was fortified by the strength of God which made itself felt in that prolonged moment of potential human weakness. Central to the glorious arms Jesus took up and employed in the counter-attack He launched against the evil one were the life-giving words of the Sacred Scriptures, whose promises He clung to and made His own. Today's Gospel shows us how Jesus used a truthful and humble reading of the word of God to combat Satan's pride-filled lies. The great deceiver had enrobed his lies in a perverted use and an erroneous interpretation of Scripture. Jesus contradicted those lies by a truthful reading and proper interpretation of the Sacred texts on the inspired word of God. The perversion of the Sacred Scriptures' message is a ploy the enemy is still inclined to resort to in his bid to ensnare God's People. It is one that can so easily trick those who do not *test the spirits to see if they come from God*, thus failing to operate proper discernment in their lives. While many do not like to talk of the stark reality of Satan's deceptions, the fact is that they are rife all around us – including within the Church. Pope Francis is not shy about naming Satan's wily tactics. He dares to speak of the temptations of the devil – *the prince of lies* – reminding us that they can be at work in the Church. He speaks of the ruse of the evil one as an ongoing reality which can disturb the life of the God's people. Pope Francis frequently reminds us that it is often Satan's way to present himself as *an angel of light* and thereby to deceive well-intentioned, seemingly godly people. In today's Gospel passage the devil is presented as making all his arguments from the basis of divine revelation in Sacred Scripture. Frequently the same approach is resorted to by those who seek to sow dissension in the Church in our own day and age. The great spiritual tradition of the Church insists that we must always be careful *to test the spirits to see if they come from God*. So much bitter zeal abounds, disguising itself as defence of the truth. Pope Francis himself is a prime target for many self-proclaimed *defenders of the truth*. Can anyone talk of truth when their discourse is devoid of love and mercy? Truth devoid of love and mercy is not Christian truth by any means! Jesus promised to send us the Spirit of truth to help us understand all things. The real truth about ourselves is that we are all broken,

sinful men and women who stand in need of God's mercy. To fail to acknowledge this is to be living a self-deceiving lie.

In today's first reading we see Moses inviting the People of Israel to recognise their humble, impoverished state. Throughout the Book of Deuteronomy we find this approach proposed to the people who prepare to enter into the Land of Promise. Again and again in this Old Testament book the People of Israel are led to remember their sacred history – rooted in their human story: a story of poverty and neediness. In the text heard this morning, Moses called the people to learn from their past. He reminded them not only of their past failures, but also of God's mighty acts on their behalf. He encouraged the people who stood before him to look to and learn from their precedent experience – both good and bad, both shameful and glorious... and this in a bid to engage themselves in the way of a better future. I find the message of the Book of Deuteronomy in this respect to be a greatly consoling one. I invite you to think of it in the same way. This book of the Bible is all about God's people being given a fresh start. It is all about them being invited to rebuild their lives after their failures and misfortunes of the past. We could think of Deuteronomy as a kind of handbook for those who are seeking to reform their existence: a handbook for men and women, like ourselves, who need to *get our lives back together again*. We are invited to see and use the liturgical season of Lent to that end. Deuteronomy makes for good Lenten reading from this perspective.

None of us will have managed to get to the point where we find ourselves in our lives today without having messed up here and there along the way. Are we going to allow our past mistakes to destroy everything? It is to be hoped that we will not give in to that temptation. What matters is that we learn from everything traversed along the way – including our negative experiences. In the Easter *Exsultet* the point is made that even our sin can be part of our experience of God's saving power in our favour. The *Exsultet* (the Easter Proclamation sung at the Solemn Vigil of Holy Saturday night) has the audacity to speak of our first parents' *felix culpa*. It declares: *Oh happy fault. Oh necessary sin of Adam... that won for us so great a Saviour*. It would be hard to reinforce the point any more than we are doing. We can learn from our past mistakes to build a better future. In many ways the health of our future depends upon what we have learned from our past. That being said, a great temptation for some of us when we think back to our past – and/or look to our present sorry state – can be to fall into discouragement; to give way to despondency; to surrender to despair. This was something of a temptation for Israel at various points along the way. It could have been the temptation for the people standing before Moses when he addressed them on the threshold of entry into the Land of Promise. Moses wisely invited the Israelites to live an honest self-assessment. Instead of seeing things of the past in the negative way the People of Israel saw them, he invited to see God's hand at work in what they endured. Instead of taking a path of denial and/or of pretending that they were more than they were, or better than they were, Moses reminded God's Chosen People of their poverty, inviting them to recall the humility of their origins. Moses presented the Israelite people's humble origin to them not as something to be ashamed of, but as something to glory in. In the New Testament the apostle will employ the same tactic and advocate a similar approach. Paul will remind his readers in Corinth of the importance for all Christian people to remember just how poor and needy they were when God stooped down to them to raise them up. Again and again Paul reminds his readers to be grateful for all the graces they have already received and also of those which are still to come. Paul shared with the Corinthians something of his own personal struggle he spoke of them of what he heard the Lord say to him at a moment of intense anguish when he pleaded with God to be delivered from the weakness, poverty and trials that were part of his life. He tells us that these were the words he heard spoken to him by way of encouragement: *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*. The apostle went on to speak of the boldness this gave him. He proclaimed: *Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that Christ's power*

*may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in my weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties.* The same can be and is true for all of us. We do not have to invent trials or suffering for ourselves. These come our way without us looking for them. As I said at the outset of this meditation, *few of us get it easy in life.* Difficulties of one sort or another are part of our lot. Who among us does not know some spiritual combat, some struggle with our demons, temptations of various kinds? These can be – and so often are – used by God in strange ways to lead us to grow in the way of holiness. We would like to dream of the way to holiness as a path of upward ascent. That is rarely how things pan out. The way to holiness the Lord proposes most often is a downward path of humility – a way of decline that is frequently strewn with humiliations of one sort or another. It is precisely by our falling down again and again that we experience the Lord our God constantly raising us up.

Amen!