

First Sunday of Lent

(Gen 2:7-9; 3:1-7; Rom 5:12-19; Matt 5:12, 17-19)

Although today is the first Sunday of Lent, a season of penance, the Scripture passages don't mention penance. Of course, we should have had that message on Ash Wednesday, when we received the ashes. How many of you did? At any rate, today's Scripture passages, even though they do not speak of penance, are very apt for instructing us about Lent. They should be fairly familiar to us. We all know, of course, about Adam and Eve and the fall in the Garden of Eden.

But the whole story is not included in today's reading; it starts by telling about the formation of the first man, about all the trees, singles out two of them for mention, the "Tree of Life" and the "Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil." Whoever arranged the lectionary readings seems to expect us to know about the prohibition of eating from the "Tree of Knowledge." Also, the reading omits a really important point: Ch. 2 ends "The man and his wife were both naked, yet they felt no shame."

Ch. 3 introduces the serpent, "the most cunning of all the animals." We should all remember that the text is presenting us symbolic language rather than being strictly historical. Otherwise, we would expect the woman to yell, "Hey, Adam, come, see this talking snake!" Instead, she calmly enters into dialogue with it. The serpent weakens her confidence in the goodness of God, "You certainly will not die! God knows your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil." But when they gave into the temptation, the only

thing they learned was that they were naked; their innocence was gone.

Our lectionary reading ends there, but it is important to read on in Scripture. When God asks Adam, “Why did you do this?” the man gallantly blames his wife: “The woman you put at my side, she ...” So one of the first effects of sin was to drive a wedge in the human community--the forerunner of a great many wedges—between couples, between family members, between races, between nations—ultimately the reason for our wars. Punishments are visited upon the couple, the most important being expulsion from the Garden; this means they are excluded from access to the “Tree of Life,” intended to keep at bay their mortality, which now, however, will overtake them. Yet before casting them out, God “made for the man and his wife garments of skin, with which he clothed them,” to replace their fig leaves. In this way God shows His continuing love and care for them.

Today’s three readings hang together and support one another very well. In the second reading St. Paul connects to the theme of the Genesis passage and explains it this way: “through one man sin entered the world, and through sin, death, and thus death came to all men, inasmuch as all sinned”: “all have sinned,” that is to say, “we all share in Adam’s sin because we have all ratified it through our personal sins.” A little further on Paul connects to our gospel reading: “For just as through the disobedience of one man the many were made sinners, so, through the obedience of one, the many will be made righteous.”

The gospel ties in with this because it is all about the obedience of the “one man,” namely, Jesus. It blows our mind that Jesus was tempted by Satan, but it was part of His human condition. As the author of Hebrews puts it, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, but without sin.” But the account of Jesus’ temptation by Satan in the desert is probably also to be understood as symbolic language; it tells us in a dramatized way about temptations Jesus actually encountered in His public ministry, situations in which He was tempted to use His power for wonderful signs, to prove He was the Messiah, without going the way of suffering intended by His Father. Would this be a real temptation for Jesus? Think of Gethsemane, where He prayed: “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you; take this cup away from me.”

An example of what I mean: when the Jews said to Jesus, “give us this bread always,” they were not asking for bread alone, but for a sign that He was what He claimed to be; if He complied He would be accepted as Messiah, but without the suffering He was destined to undergo. Again, on the occasion when Peter confessed Jesus as Messiah, he tried to persuade Jesus not to say (or think) He had to suffer and die: this would be a temptation similar to the first: “How to Become Messiah without Tears.” On that occasion Jesus addresses Peter in almost the same terms as He did the Devil in the desert: “Get behind me, Satan.” On the cross the chief priests taunted Jesus: “Let him come down from the cross and we will believe in him. For he said, ‘I am the Son of God’.” Just as Satan in the wilderness had tempted Him

to prove Himself the Son of God, saying, “If you are the Son of God” do this, that, or the other thing. In each case, Jesus proved He was the Son of God, not by yielding to the easy course, but by being obedient to His Father. So the second reading tells us, “Through the obedience of one, the many were made righteous.”

So we’ve got it made, right? We’ve been made righteous! Not so fast! It’s not as though nothing is expected of us. If we are children of God, we, like the Son of God, must display obedience. Well, obedience to what? One of the commandments is “You shall not steal.” If you’re in a large department store and unobserved, are you tempted to make off with that expensive purse or with that iPad? How many of you are kleptomaniacs? (Raise hand) I didn’t think so. But there are lots of other commandments. It has truly been said, “If you overcome just one vice each year, you’ll soon be perfect.” I understood it this way when Abbot James exhorted us on Ash Wednesday to begin by “taking aim” at one particular failing. We might start by removing some of the wedges that separate the human community.

But St. James has advice more comprehensive: “If anyone does not fall short in speech,” he says, “he is a perfect man.” (I think it works for women, too.) So this is a shortcut to becoming perfect. But it isn’t easy. Many years ago when my sister was entertaining a group of ladies from the neighborhood, my brother-in-law, in collusion with a confederate, set up a tape recorder. He surreptitiously turned it on, wandered into the room, and innocently asked, “What do you girls think of that redhead who just moved into the block?” then wandered

away. Later he came back and played for them what had been recorded. There was great embarrassment all around.

It ain't really funny! St. James says: "The tongue is a fire. It exists among our members as world of malice, defiling the whole body and setting the entire course of our lives on fire." Strong language! Maybe we can make it our goal in Lent to control our tongues. (You say you'd rather fast?) If we do control our tongues, St. James says, we'll be perfect. That's a big order, but perhaps a measure of how hard it is. We can't guarantee perfection, but let's remember there's that other way, i.e., of overcoming one vice each year. Perhaps a slower, but perhaps a surer way of gaining perfection. But if we begin by trying to control our tongues, we can be working toward perfection in both ways. A good aim for Lent.