

Text: Matthew 4:1-11
First Sunday of Lent, Cycle A
5 March 2017
© Rev. Paul R Pluth, JCL

Today's Mass is a drama in two acts about God's cosmic redo of the universe. In the first act, the Bible uses the story of Adam and Eve to illustrate the defeat of men and women at the hands of the deceiving serpent, Satan, the Devil – and if you don't believe in the Devil, you can see the story of Adam and Eve as humanity overcome by everything that destroys the meaning and hope and happiness of human life. And the Church knows that the story of Adam and Eve is a story, not history – a story to present the perennial affliction of men and women by what seeks to rob humans of the peace God intended us to have in our lives, destroying God's plan for us. In the second act, Jesus is sent by God his Father to be the new Adam, the hero for humanity who will overcome the enemy of humanity – the devil, the symbol of whatever tempts us away from the meaningful life God intends for us in a friendship with him, to redo God's plan for us and set it back on track. And, in between the acts of this cosmic drama, St Paul is the commentator who explains what is happening, just in case we missed it, telling us –

Just as one man's trespass – the sin of Adam – led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness – the victory of Jesus – leads to life for all.

Where humanity, symbolized by Adam and Eve, were defeated, Jesus succeeds in destroying all that destroys the joy of human life.

After the Holy Spirit fills Jesus with power at his baptism, the Bible says the Holy Spirit immediately leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Jesus' confrontation with the power of darkness in the wilderness is part of God's plan to win us back to himself. But first, Jesus prepares by fasting from food for 40 days – like a long line of Biblical heroes before him who went into the wilderness to fast and prepare, such as Moses who ate and drank nothing for 40 days as part of his encounter with God on Mount Sinai. And after 40 days of fasting from food, Jesus is hungry, the Bible tells us – you'd think Jesus would be weak and in a vulnerable position. On the contrary – through his spiritual discipline Jesus is made stronger to reject the temptations presented to him: the temptation to turn stones into bread to feed himself; the temptation to test God's love and compassion by throwing himself off a tower; the temptation to obtain political

power by turning away from God in pursuit of his own goals.

We hear this story every year on the First Sunday of Lent, because Jesus' 40 days of fasting and spiritual preparation in the wilderness is the model for our 40 Lenten days of doing without and focusing on prayer and spiritual preparation in Lent. You'll hear that as we begin the celebration of the Eucharist, and the prayer says, "By abstaining forty long days from earthly food, Jesus consecrated through his fast the pattern of *our* Lenten observance." But take note: it's *after* his 40 days of fasting in the wilderness that Jesus is tempted by the devil, *not during*. During our 40 days of Lent, with all the resources and reminders we have to keep a spiritual focus, it's easier to develop a relationship with God. It's *after Easter* that we're going to be tempted to turn away from God, and all the spiritual training we put in during the 40 days of Lent is going to be put to the test as we face the same temptations Jesus faced. The first temptation is the temptation to treat God as some sort of magician who is there to respond to our commands, rather than trusting God to provide for us and waiting for God to act. That's the temptation of turning stones into bread. The second temptation is to always demand more and more from God, even when we have seen how God does answer our prayers and gives us what we *need*, which may not be the same as what we *want*. That's the temptation to Jesus to throw himself off the tower of the Temple and wait for God to rescue him. The third temptation is to seek to get by in life on our own power, and aim for success without turning to God, rather than walking humbly with God and seeking his kingdom, his goals, first. That's the temptation to Jesus to turn away from God and rule an earthly kingdom, rather than bringing in the kingdom of God.

Right now, with the spiritual support system of Lent, it's easier to keep at bay the temptations to treat God as a magician there for our wishes, to want more from God than God chooses to give, to try to get by in life without God. But after Easter, when we're called upon to carry on and live the Christian life, that's when the temptations will come and the testing will be stronger. That's when we will discover if we have grown through the spiritual discipline of the 40 days of Lent, or not.

A special word to our candidates, who will be received into the Catholic Church on Holy Thursday, and be confirmed and make your First Communion. Right now, looking forward to the

fullness of life in the Church is exciting; it's the honeymoon. I know – I, too, once was a candidate excited about being received into the Church at Easter. Enjoy this time. But after Easter – that's when the honeymoon ends and the marriage begins, and life as a Catholic is not always easy or exciting or happy: but it is infinitely rewarding, if we always turn to Jesus Christ the Victorious Lord.

The Bible says that, after 40 days of fasting from food in the desert, Jesus was hungry. The 40 days of Lent should make us hungry too – hungry for God. The closing prayer of this Mass should be every Catholic's prayer. That prayer says:

We pray, O Lord, that we may learn to hunger for Christ, the true and living Bread, and strive to live by every word which proceeds from your mouth. Through Christ our Lord.