

1st Sunday of Lent – Cycle A

First Sunday of Lent Lectionary: 22

Reading 1 [Gn 2:7-9; 3:1-7](#)

The LORD God formed man out of the clay of the ground
and blew into his nostrils the breath of life,
and so man became a living being.

Then the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east,
and placed there the man whom he had formed.
Out of the ground the LORD God made various trees grow
that were delightful to look at and good for food,
with the tree of life in the middle of the garden
and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the animals
that the LORD God had made.
The serpent asked the woman,
"Did God really tell you not to eat
from any of the trees in the garden?"
The woman answered the serpent:
"We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden;
it is only about the fruit of the tree
in the middle of the garden that God said,
'You shall not eat it or even touch it, lest you die.'"
But the serpent said to the woman:
"You certainly will not die!
No, God knows well that the moment you eat of it
your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods
who know what is good and what is evil."
The woman saw that the tree was good for food,
pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom.
So she took some of its fruit and ate it;
and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her,
and he ate it.
Then the eyes of both of them were opened,
and they realized that they were naked;
so they sewed fig leaves together
and made loincloths for themselves.

Responsorial Psalm [Ps 51:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 17](#)

R. (cf. 3a) **Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.**
Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness;
in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense.
Thoroughly wash me from my guilt
and of my sin cleanse me.

R. **Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.**
For I acknowledge my offense,
and my sin is before me always:
"Against you only have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight."

R. **Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.**
A clean heart create for me, O God,
and a steadfast spirit renew within me.
Cast me not out from your presence,
and your Holy Spirit take not from me.

R. **Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.**
Give me back the joy of your salvation,
and a willing spirit sustain in me.
O Lord, open my lips,

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and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.
R. Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

Reading 2 [Rom 5:12-19](#)

Brothers and sisters:
Through one man sin entered the world,
and through sin, death,
and thus death came to all men, inasmuch as all sinned—
for up to the time of the law, sin was in the world,
though sin is not accounted when there is no law.
But death reigned from Adam to Moses,
even over those who did not sin
after the pattern of the trespass of Adam,
who is the type of the one who was to come.
But the gift is not like the transgression.
For if by the transgression of the one, the many died,
how much more did the grace of God
and the gracious gift of the one man Jesus Christ
overflow for the many.
And the gift is not like the result of the one who sinned.
For after one sin there was the judgment that brought condemnation;
but the gift, after many transgressions, brought acquittal.
For if, by the transgression of the one,
death came to reign through that one,
how much more will those who receive the abundance of grace
and of the gift of justification
come to reign in life through the one Jesus Christ.
In conclusion, just as through one transgression
condemnation came upon all,
so, through one righteous act,
acquittal and life came to all.
For just as through the disobedience of the one man
the many were made sinners,
so, through the obedience of the one,
the many will be made righteous.

Or [Rom 5:12, 17-19](#)

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Verse Before the Gospel [Mt 4:4b](#)

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One does not live on bread alone,
but on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.

Gospel [Mt 4:1-11](#)

At that time Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert
to be tempted by the devil.

He fasted for forty days and forty nights,
and afterwards he was hungry.

The tempter approached and said to him,

"If you are the Son of God,
command that these stones become loaves of bread."

He said in reply,

"It is written:

*One does not live on bread alone,
but on every word that comes forth
from the mouth of God."*

Then the devil took him to the holy city,
and made him stand on the parapet of the temple,
and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down.

For it is written:

*He will command his angels concerning you
and with their hands they will support you,
lest you dash your foot against a stone."*

Jesus answered him,

"Again it is written,

You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test."

Then the devil took him up to a very high mountain,
and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence,
and he said to him, "All these I shall give to you,
if you will prostrate yourself and worship me."

At this, Jesus said to him,

"Get away, Satan!

It is written:

*The Lord, your God, shall you worship
and him alone shall you serve."*

Then the devil left him and, behold,
angels came and ministered to him.

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(Pause for a few moments!) Is every one comfortable? Should we be? After all, Lent started 4 days ago! I am quite sure you all heard the saying that ‘familiarity breeds contempt’. I have always thought of that as - when we are comfortable we don’t appreciate the predicament we are in. There is only understanding and progress when we make the effort but when we are comfortable we usually relax and fall into a kind of stupor or hangover. We accept small imperfections that become more insidious and possibly sinful and then it escalates into bad habits or bad ways of living where we no longer work on our relationships with God or those whom have been placed in our lives. So, I propose, that we should not be comfortable during Lent. As Father David mentioned on Ash Wednesday, Lent comes from the Old English for Spring, and that should be our wake-up call to get on with the Spring Cleaning of our spiritual lives, to put discipline back into our conscious lives. The Church summarizes Lent as a time of thought, spiritual practice and preparation; a time of prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

Not unsurprising, in the readings for today, the Church brings us back to the spiritual basics, and we are invited to contemplate two great archetypes - spiritual “order and disorder” – the two sides of existence at its basics. Let us start with the first one: It is greatly important to realize that in the symbolic language of Genesis which we hear today, God has placed the first human beings in a garden. This garden is a place of delight for the eyes, for the mind, and for the senses. Obviously, a place of comfort. The true God wants what is best for us. He wants us to live in a garden. That means he wants us to share in the life and love of the Trinity – His own life! That is why, symbolically, there is a ***Tree of Life*** in the middle of the garden, because the garden is all about “life”. It centers on the eternal life offered by God. The life of the garden radiates out from that central point – that point that is God Himself.

So, what about this ***Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil***? And why are Adam and Eve prohibited from eating of it? They can eat of all the trees and they can take in the delights of the Garden but this one tree they cannot eat of. “Why?” —because it stands for something that is the unique prerogative of God. **For God alone is the objective standard of the Good.** All He asks is that we agree and live accordingly. Things that are in conformity to his manner of being are good and things that run contrary to his manner of being are evil. The point is - only God can function as the criterion for what is good and evil. WE CANNOT! That is obviously opposed to society and its call to make us the criteria of good and evil for ourselves! Make us choose to be gods.

But I digress, to eat of the Tree of knowledge of Good and Evil therefore, is to take to oneself the unique Divine Capacity to determine good and evil. Eat of all the other trees, yes—live life to the fullest, absolutely, but do so in accord with the objectivity of the Good which is God. The one thing you cannot do is make yourself the criterion of good and evil. And God is not merely being difficult or capricious here. It is simple spiritual physics, when you make yourself the criterion of good and evil—then the whole thing falls apart. For example, when all persons have a different idea of what is right or wrong everyone spends all their time inwardly focused on their own self-defined reality and reject being outwardly aware of God and each other. That is why there can only be one objective truth – God.

Notice then, in light of this, the subtlety of the devil’s temptation. The serpent, in the symbolic language of Genesis, says: You will certainly not die—NO—God knows well that the moment you eat it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, who know what is good and evil. You see what he is doing? See how important this is—he sets up the situation to put God as wanting his creation to be less than fully alive. He is trying to lure them into that old, tired spirituality of the pagan myths. He wants to convince them that God

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wants them less and that somehow God is their rival. The whole ploy revolves around puffing them up with the suggestion that they will become divine, if they seize this one little prerogative of God – to define truth of right and wrong for themselves.

What we have here is the most fundamental of temptations. It is so important that we pay attention to it on this First Sunday of Lent. The fundamental temptation is the deification of the human will. And this is the source of our greatest suffering. It is with us constantly with society advertising pluralism as if there is no object truth and the constant stroking of our egos to buy into our own interests at the expense of everyone else's. But we see in the Scripture it has always been the human temptation. What we have here, by way of the devil's suggestion and Adam and Eve's embracing of it, is the eclipsing of the Good through the "imperialism of freedom". In other words, my freedom, your freedom, trumps even good and evil. This ancient story, I hope you see, has tremendous resonance today! We live in a culture that values freedom to a bizarre degree. If you have any doubts about this, look at the famous *Planned Parenthood vs. Casey* decision of the U.S. Supreme Court back in 1992. It is where our Supreme Court Justices said that "it belongs to the very nature of freedom to determine the meaning of one's own life, and indeed, the meaning of the universe." And I'm not making that up. That is the language of our Supreme Court. That's called freedom run amok or imperialistic freedom.

Do you see how freedom is determining good and evil? THIS is the original sin. If we unpack the densely textured, symbolic language of Genesis, that is what is being said. The original sin is giving ourselves, to you and me, the prerogative of determining good and evil. What this leads to is the transformation of the Garden into a desert. Because when freedom trumps good, and freedom trumps truth—then the Divine Life is now cut off and life in us dries up. Watch how throughout the Bible the image of the desert emerges—a place of lifelessness and a place of aimless wandering, a place where we are cut off from the Divine Source.

All of us descendants of Adam and Eve have our freedom and nothing else. We took our freedom and left the Garden. Other very bad things follow as well. When you make your own freedom the criterion of Good and Evil, you effectively turn yourself into God. And when you do that, you make yourself, ipso facto, the center of the universe. BUT that is what God is—He is the center of the universe. But our deification comes at a price, the price that now the world begins to revolve around you. And your fellow human beings make the very same tragic choice. Remember, Eve passed the apple on to Adam and it all began! We all became gods. But gods do not tolerate each other very well—there just cannot be two or more centers of the universe. "I'm the criterion of good and evil" I say in my freedom—and you say the same thing in yours—then what happens? We will inevitably clash—we have to clash—because we are like two great planets trying to occupy the same space. So you can see why conflict will follow so inevitably from all this.

And when God confronts Adam and Eve, what do we hear? We hear the language of conflict. "She made me do it. That woman you gave me, she gave me the apple." That serpent you put into the garden, "he made the suggestion that we eat". You see, right away we fall into desperate competition and rivalry and self-interest. Rival centers of the universe - Gods do not tolerate each other at all! This has been known forever, just read some Greek and Roman Mythology. Two absolute wills do not mesh – they do not even play nice together! How do we get all this to work out? What brings us together is when together we surrender to a greater good or truth that is beyond the both of us. That our minds and wills acknowledge a truth that we haven't invented ourselves. That is when we come together.

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The Church today, right now, says for us to pay attention and see this great archetypal story in correlation with the narrative of Jesus' temptation. We first notice that Jesus is led by the spirit into the desert. He goes into the place of sin, into the lifeless wasteland outside of the Garden. That territory produced by self-DE-i-FY-ing freedom and he faces the same tempter that confronted Adam and Eve. And, once again, the wicked spirit has the same strategy to lure him into self-deification—he wants to cause Jesus to make his freedom and his will superior to God's will. And does so through recourse to three of the most fundamental needs of human beings: sensual satisfaction, honor, and power, all places humanity wants comfort.

Notice, please, how Jesus turns him back: ***One does not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.*** In other words, God's goodness and order are more important than sensual satisfaction. ***You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.*** In other words, God's goodness and purpose are more important than being honored or looked up to. ***The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you adore.*** In other words, God's goodness is more important than worldly power. The devil is tempting him to deify his own will, to seek his own projects. And he uses these three great temptations to do it. Yet, in each case, Jesus resists, no matter how passionately His freedom may want these things. He subordinates His freedom to the will of the Father.

There it is, right from the beginning: that is the key which is the center and touchstone of the spiritual life. Do you deify your own freedom? Or do you subordinate your freedom to the objective goodness and truth which is God? Do you accept the high adventure of the spiritual life? Do you live in the Garden or do you wander aimlessly in the desert, the place of lifelessness? Do we make every moment to moment decision to satisfy our wills and interests or do we live lives that are ordered to God's will? This is our first Lenten meditation. Does it infringe on our comfort? Hopefully it does and then that wake-up call should guides us to address those issues that arise from the distorted reality that our own freedom promises will make us gods. Hopefully we will walk this Lent to leave the falsehood of self-deification, the original sin, behind us. We have the next six weeks to work on this. Work on this by taking a moment before every action and ask is this for selfish or selfless love? Is this to honor me or God?

Amen.

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(Adapted from a homily by Father David M Chiantella given on 9 Mar 2014)