

## The 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent - A

We have entered into the Holy Season of Lent: A time of thought, spiritual practice and preparation; a time of prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

In the readings for today, the Church brings us back to the spiritual basics. We are invited to contemplate two great archetypes of spiritual order and disorder.

Let us start with the first one: It is greatly important to realize that in the symbolic language of Genesis, 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.

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. That's 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.

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.**

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!

To eat of this Tree 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, and 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.

Notice now in light of what I just said, the subtlety of the devil's temptation. The serpent, in Genesis' symbolic language 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 is insinuating that God is their rival. That God wants them 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 wants them less than fully alive. And he puffs them up with the suggestion that they will become divine, if they seize this prerogative.

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 my dear friends, this is the source of our greatest suffering. 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 remarkable 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, 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 arrogating to us, to you and me, the prerogative of determining good and evil.

What this leads to is the transformation of the Garden of Genesis into a desert. Because when freedom trumps the good, and freedom trumps the 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, 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. 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 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—what then 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. Gods do not tolerate each other. Rival centers of the universe just have a hard time becoming friends. Two absolute wills do not mesh.

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 ourselves invented. That is when we come together.

Now the Church is compelling us to 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. Where does he go now? He goes into the place of sin, into the lifeless wasteland outside of the Garden. That territory produced by self-deifying 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 3 of the most fundamental needs of human beings: sensual satisfaction, honor, and power.

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 is 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 3 great temptations to do it.

Yet, in each case, Jesus resists. No matter how passionately his freedom wants these things. His freedom is subordinated to the will of the Father.

There it is my brothers and sisters: 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 great 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? This is our first Lenten meditation.

- Fr. David M. Chiantella