

Homily 1st Sunday in Lent (5.3.17)

God versus the human ego

You know I love the Book of Genesis. The compiler of Genesis was writing hundreds of years before Christ, in pre science, before they knew anything of the answers to the mysteries that we know. And they were struggling, this ancient tribe of the Jews - with this idea of the Good God who had delivered them - why was there suffering in the world, and why did God permit evil? And so they took two stories of Adam and Eve, both from the ancient storytelling tradition, and used them to tell the truth as they saw it, of the reality of how evil came into the world. The tree of knowledge represents God, and the story of Adam and Eve is the story of mankind trying to assert themselves as gods, or to make themselves greater than, or to usurp God- with the obvious consequences.

Modern psychiatry backs up this idea with the concept of the ego. Freud said the ego is rampant, it just consumes everything in its path, and asserts itself over everybody else. The story of the temptation, and Adam and Eve's realisation that they were naked, is a euphemism for what happens when we try to become gods – or in their case to be like God – their minds were disturbed. They could no longer live peaceably in one another's presence with sexual appetites. We too can experience that same disturbance. We need to acknowledge God alone as Lord, to give order and peace in our lives, and to regulate and moderate our dealings with others. In other words, we need to control the ego. St Augustine says something very similar about our baser desires – he calls it lust, and says it's primarily nothing to do with sex. It's the desire in our hearts to consume everything, to give in totally to our baser appetites, at the cost of others. And this is the source of what we call Original Sin - that flaw in us which will pull us towards our appetites. It's a flaw in Creation which God never intended.

In the Temptations which we read about in today's Gospel Jesus shows the opposite to all the above. Jesus does not give in to temptation. The temptations themselves are interesting. Turning the stones into bread. That's

basic temptation - defy the will of God – and in Jesus’s case - if You, Jesus are the Son of God... prove it! And Jesus replies with that famous phrase

“Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

Jesus is saying, yes we do need basic things to sustain ourselves, but there are deeper issues beyond mere food and drink. Remember Jesus was truly Man, and in his weakened fasting state He could have hallucinated – He could have had these visions, these temptations to test Him.

And then we are told, Jesus was taken to the top of the Temple in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the epicentre of the Jewish establishment, and the Jewish faith. Remember the phrase in the psalms -

“if I forget you Jerusalem, let my right hand wither.”

The Jews saw Jerusalem as a foretaste of the heavenly city - the New Jerusalem. If You are the Son of God throw yourself down, and You will not be harmed - that is about usurping power again. And Jesus says,

“You must not put the Lord your God to the test.”

And then the devil gives Jesus a vision of the world and says bow down and worship me and all this will be yours. And again that’s all about usurping God’s prerogative, and making yourself a monster – totally caught up in greed, power and control. But you know, these temptations are ours. They’re about our appetites, making ourselves the source of everything – wanting to be lustful – to control, and at the same time allowing ourselves to be controlled by our desires and our ego.

And so this first Sunday of Lent is an invitation for us to take stock before we get too far into Lent. Jesus’s extreme fasting in the desert, is an example given to us by Christ - an indicator if you like, of the necessity to deny ourselves to become more perfect. Modern psychology tells us this, and backs up the Church’s claim, that if we deny ourselves, this actually strengthens our will, and helps us to make decisions that are not bound by our appetites.

The Church asks us to take on some fasting on the Fridays and Wednesdays of Lent - these are known as the Ember Days, and some abstinence also. The

Church then rightly asks us to give to charity the money we would have spent the money we have saved through our fasting and abstinence – almsgiving. However, the Church recognises that

‘the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak’

and so, through long tradition has said that the Sundays of Lent are not days of fasting and abstinence. If you think about it, from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday, there are 46 days. If you take out those Sundays, you have the 40 days of Lent – BUT if you’re really good like Jesus, you’ll do it all the time!