

Living Faith

WHERE FAITH MAKES A DIFFERENCE IN OUR EVERYDAY LIVES

Week One - Rededicating Ourselves to the Spirit of Encounter

Opening Prayer (St. Agnes & St. William of York Prayer of Rededication)

Lord Jesus, we rededicate ourselves to you today.

We commit ourselves to the promises of our baptism.

And we ask that you make us - wherever we are - missionaries for you.

Amen.

Introduction

- Themes
 - Temptation
 - Sin
 - Conversion
- Quiet Reflection
 - Lent is a time of rededication - a time to reflect, a time to assess, and a time to seek conversion through God's mercy. Through the gift of God's grace we have the opportunity to rededicate ourselves to God anew. Cleansed of our sin through the sacrament of reconciliation, we can move forward in both our day-to-day living and in our relationships with others. We open our eyes to see God in the other, and open our hearts to share God's mercy.
- Brief Discussion
 - What have you decided to give up for Lent? What prompted you to make the choice you did? Will giving up be difficult for you? Why or why not?

- Think of a time when someone was present to you in a “desert” moment. How did they help? How have you been a presence for others in their “desert”?

Reading - Matthew 4:1-11 “The Temptation of Jesus”

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.

Fr. Foppiano's Reflection

Video link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_fLPiE6ySt8

Introduction

The readings for the First Sunday of Lent are a treasure trove of spiritual insights. Remember the readings from Sunday Mass. In the first reading we heard the story of the creation and the sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden. Then St. Paul in his Letter to the Romans beautifully describes how that transgression is, not only forgiven, but forgiven in abundance by the sufferings of Jesus. The Gospel is the familiar Lenten Gospel of Jesus' temptation in the desert. Here we have three encounters: Adam and Eve with the devil, the encounter of grace, and Jesus and the devil. Through these three encounters we learn something of the current state of our human nature and how God is working in our lives and in the life of our Community.

Adam and Eve

The first reading opens with the words of the Book of Genesis describing the creation of man: "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."¹ We also learn that God planted a garden for Adam and Eve to provide for their needs and formed all the wild beasts over which man was given dominion.²

The state of Adam and Eve in the Garden after their creation is what is called the state of "original holiness and justice." The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes that state as follows: "This grace of original holiness was 'to share in... divine life'. By the radiance of this grace all dimensions of man's life were confirmed. As long as he remained in the divine intimacy, man would not have to suffer or die. The inner harmony of the human person, the harmony between man and woman, and finally the harmony between the first couple and all creation, comprised the state called 'original justice'."³ The encounter between God and his creation in the beginning was an encounter of perfection and harmony.

However, we learn that this state was not to last for there would be another encounter in the Garden of Eden. That encounter would have long lasting effects on man. The encounter between the devil and Adam and Eve turned man's will against God making him distrustful of God. This is symbolized by the man and woman hiding themselves from God when they realize that they are naked. The Catechism tells us that after this encounter:

The harmony in which they had found themselves, thanks to original justice, is now destroyed: the control of the soul's spiritual faculties over the body is shattered; the union of man and woman becomes subject to tensions, their relations henceforth marked by lust and domination. Harmony with creation is broken: visible creation has become alien and hostile to man. Because of man, creation is now subject "to its bondage to decay". Finally, the consequence explicitly foretold for this disobedience will come true: man will "return to the ground", for out of it he was taken. Death makes its entrance into human history.⁴

The Encounter of Grace

How does God remedy this situation? St. Paul gives us the answer in his Letter to the Romans. He says that just as sin entered the world through the transgression of one man (Adam), grace has entered the world through the

¹ Genesis 2:7.

² Genesis 2:8-20.

³ CCC #375 & 376.

⁴ CCC #400.

obedience of the new man, Jesus. He tells us that this grace comes in abundance to those who are in Christ Jesus: "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."⁵ The obedience of Jesus reverses the disobedience of Adam.

Specifically, how is this accomplished? It is accomplished through the cross which is the definitive encounter between God and man. The crucifixion and death of the Son of God is the exclamation point of the Incarnation. God become man willing to take on himself his creation's disobedience so that the grace of friendship can flow once again. The cross stands as the definitive encounter between God and man reminding us that God has the last word over our fallen human condition.

I think that whenever we talk about our Mission, Vision, and Purpose as a church community people automatically doubt and think that they can't be a part of that because of their own shortcomings and sinfulness. The Holy Father acknowledges this tendency in his document on evangelization, *The Joy of the Gospel*. But, he says: "All of us are called to offer others an explicit witness to the saving love of the Lord, who despite our imperfections offers us his closeness, his word and his strength, and gives meaning to our lives. [...] Our falling short of perfection should be no excuse; on the contrary, mission is a constant stimulus not to remain mired in mediocrity but to continue growing."⁶ Remember St. Paul, who himself acknowledged that he was still a work in progress. In his Letter to the Philippians he says: "It is not that I have already taken hold of it or have already attained perfect maturity, but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it, since I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ [Jesus]."⁷

The Encounter in the Desert

The encounter between Jesus and the devil in the desert can help us understand a bit better the temptations which we face in life and the struggle between doing good and doing evil.

The story of the temptation of Jesus in the desert comes around every year on the First Sunday of Lent. The story is somewhat familiar to us. Following his baptism in the Jordan River, the Spirit impels Jesus to go out into the desert for

⁵ Romans 5:19.

⁶ *The Joy of the Gospel*, #121.

⁷ Philippians 3:12.

a 40 day fast. When it is over he is naturally tired, hungry, and exhausted physically, spiritually, and mentally. The devil tries to take advantage of the situation but Our Lord recognizes this encounter for what it is, namely, a false encounter.

We all face false encounters with the evil one – times when he tempts us to distrust God or to think something that is harmful to us is actually good. He can take advantage of our weaknesses whether they be spiritual, mental, and/or physical. These temptations are false encounters. In this episode in the desert, Jesus teaches us that in those moments we should remember that our love for God should motivate us to act in accord with what he tells us is good for us. It is common to think of the Christian life as a series of “do nots” or you are going to go to hell. It is a lot more motivating to think of the Christian life as living as God tells us to live out of love for him and preferring his love above everything else. Jesus dismisses the devil by focusing on pleasing God by his actions.

In regards to the Mission, Vision, and Purpose of our Parishes, what are the false encounters of the evil one? Where do the temptations lie?

In the conference room where we have our weekly Senior Leadership Team Meetings on the wall we hung up a poster entitled “How to Kill the Creative Process.” On the poster are 25 common phrases everyone uses. These include: “Don’t be ridiculous;” “It costs too much;” “It’s too radical a change;” “We’re not ready;” and my own personal favorite that I hear all the time: “We’ve never done it that way before.” Whenever we try to live according to the vision of the Gospel we’re going to face temptations. Moving our community to live out our Mission, Vision, and Purpose is going to be full of temptations too – temptations to stay where we are because we are comfortable there. Trying to make ourselves comfortable leads to sin in our spiritual lives and it leads to complacency in the life of our Parishes. And it will never lead to God’s vision being fulfilled for us or for our community.

Conclusion

The encounters which we have reflected on today reveal both the good and the bad side of our humanity. We are made in the image and likeness of God. God has pronounced humanity to be very good. Yet sin entered the world and altered our relationship with God. We struggle against temptations of the flesh, temptations to power and glory, and temptations to distrust God. Jesus has won an abundance of grace for us through his cross when he reversed the disobedience of Adam. It is possible to live in friendship with God and our love for him motivates us to do this.

The same happens in the community of our Parishes. We are tempted to a false encounter when we want to stay where we are because we are comfortable or because we doubt our own ability to be a witness for Jesus. But the movement of God's Holy Spirit impels us to move forward picking up our calling to be missionary disciples. Let us remember the words of the Prophet Habakkuk: "The vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint; if it delays, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not be late."⁸

Group Discussion

- How have you encountered God's grace in your life? How were you changed by the experience?
- Think of a time when you felt alone in the "desert." Did you struggle feeling the presence of God? How were you able to move out of your "desert"?
- What techniques - prayer, reflection, etc. - have you used to help you regain or deepen your connection with Jesus?

Reflection - In Our Desert Temptation is a Powerful Enemy

- We've all faced times when we felt separated from God. We may ask in our frustration or sadness or anger "Why did God allow this to happen?" We feel lost, alone, thirsting for something that seems just beyond our grasp. Easy "solutions" present themselves - solutions that may give us temporary relief or pleasure, but by their nature create a barrier between ourselves and God. In our "desert" times God seems far away, or that we have been forgotten. In actuality, God is as close to us in our despair as he is in joy.
- In a meditation on the nature of temptation Pope Francis said...

"We are all tempted, because... our spiritual life, our Christian life, is a battle [that comes from the fact] the devil does not want us to become holy, he does not want us to follow Jesus.

"The temptation of the devil has three characteristics and we need to learn about them in order not to fall into the trap. What does Satan do to distance us from the path of Jesus? Firstly, his temptation begins gradually but grows and is

⁸ Habakkuk 2:2-3

always growing. Secondly, it grows and infects another person, it spreads to another and seeks to be part of the community. And in the end, in order to calm the soul, it justifies itself. It grows, it spreads and it justifies itself.”

- Sometimes the temptation we may face is to convince ourselves the devil is not real, or is not active in our world today. This is a dangerous rationalization. In the film “The Usual Suspects” Kevin Spacey’s character says “The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist.” Misleading ourselves about the existence of the devil can only lead to disaster.

Group Discussion

- In what ways can we recognize the workings of Satan in our world?
- What is your “takeaway” today? What stood out to you? What challenged you?
- In the week ahead, how can you apply what you heard today to your life and your interactions with others?

Closing

- We are surrounded by evil. It attacks us in our weakest moments. It takes advantage of our needs and desires. We are human and can easily fall prey to evil. Lenten practices can be a powerful weapon throughout the year, not just a few weeks as winter turns to spring. Prayer, fasting, reflection, the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist all draw us closer to God and strengthen us for the battles ahead.

- Scripture verse (Romans 5:19)

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.

- Closing Prayer - (The Jesus Prayer)

The Jesus Prayer is a short, simple prayer that can put you in the right frame of mind to get closer to God. And, at one sentence long, it's quite easy to memorize!

We find a similar version of this prayer in Luke's Gospel in our Lord's parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Both of them are praying in the temple in Jesus' account, yet the contrite tax collector is justified before God rather than the smug Pharisee, who's boasting about his religious achievements (Lk 18:9-14). What does the tax collector ask of God here? "Be merciful to me a sinner" (Lk 18:13).

Outside of this Gospel account, the Jesus Prayer can be traced back to the Eastern Orthodox Church from the 4th century. (<http://www.ourcatholicprayers.com/jesus-prayer.html>)

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Amen.