

the Sunday Readings



"If you are the Son of GOD, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But Jesus answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every WORD that comes from the mouth of GOD.'" (Mt. 4:3-4)

1st SUNDAY OF LENT

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*the temptation to power*¹

introduction

The Lenten Sunday Eucharistic liturgies are the focus for taking seriously our formal re-commitment to our baptismal promises at Easter.² The autumn season's lessening daylight & cooling temperatures image for us GOD's presence checking and pruning back our extravagant growths – bringing about effects which may go unnoticed now, but which will, in time, produce surprising new growth.

first reading: Genesis 2 : 7 – 9 & 3 : 1 – 7³ [GOD's work; the first sin & its punishment]

*Then the LORD GOD formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.(7) And the LORD GOD planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed.(8) Out of the ground the LORD GOD made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.(9)*⁴

The Israelites were never much interested in mythical legends about of the origin of the world. For the northern tradition, history began with the liberation from Egypt. However the agenda of the royal scribes of the southern tradition, was to promote Solomon and they sought to place the king and Israelite history within the wider framework of world history. They adopted the language of myth to explain the origin of the world and its people.

The story of Adam and Eve is the beginning of a series of stories that bear on royal succession. The royal scribes desired to explain Solomon's coming to power as the fulfillment of the LORD GOD's promises of a new community. The stories start with the creature ('adam) formed from the soil of the ground ('adamah) and is placed in a garden which included *the Trees of Life and Knowledge* (vv.7-9). In other words, the human creatures are put in a place where there are limits to human knowing. The

1 Cover Image: 1st Sunday in Lent from the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, Peru.

2 A group study of the Lenten Sunday readings is good preparation for such re-commitment. The presence of such groups can alert the whole parish community to deepen their baptismal commitment. The first Sunday of Lent is the occasion of enrolling (rite of election) of catechumens, who thus begin their formal preparation to receive the sacraments of initiation at Easter. Adaption of catechesis using an enlistment rite (this Sunday) and a form of the traditional scrutinies (third, fourth and fifth Sundays) could be useful to shape several types of re-commitment programme (i.e. appropriate for baptised children, for teenagers and even for those of mature commitments!).

3 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

4 [v.9] *Garden* – used here as the name of a region in southern Mesopotamia. The term is derived from the Sumerian word 'eden' = 'fertile plain'. A similar-sounding Hebrew word means, 'delight'; the garden in Eden could be understood as 'the garden of delight', so that, through the Greek version, it is now known also as, 'paradise': literally, a 'pleasure park'.

probing of the limits of human knowing, centres around the establishment of community (vv.18-25) and the violation of community (*Gn.3:1-7*).

Knowledge leads to the freedom to act and a capacity to control. Later Solomon sought to redefine the limits of knowledge by removing all mystery and manufacturing new knowledge. He aggressively assumed powers that ran contrary to Israelite experience of the reality of dependence, limit and prohibition in human affairs and in Nature. The story-telling asserts that creatures depend on the Creator and that the garden is a gift. The primary focus of the story-telling is GOD's powerful command.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD GOD had made. GOD said to the woman, "Did GOD say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?"(3:1) The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden;(2) but GOD said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'"(3) But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die;(4) for GOD knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like GOD, knowing good and evil."(5) So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.(6) Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.(7)

The story-telling discerns that there is something about reality which remains hidden and mysterious and which cannot be manipulated by human power or knowing. The gift of life in the human heart and in the human community is a mystery retained by the LORD GOD. The gift is not at the free disposal of human ingenuity and imagination. The story demonstrates what knowledge and power does to community. Recognising and honouring limits leads to well-being. Story-telling offers a perspective for evaluating the role of the present royal house from within the wider framework of GOD's promises. While Solomon may later be presented as the rightful successor to the royal house and fulfillment of the ancient promise of creation, there remain limits, that even the royal house on its good days, must respect and obey.⁵

5 In Israelite history the obedience question begins with Sarah and Abraham. It continues in the story of Moses. It surfaces in the accounts about the significant women in that history: Rebecca, Rachel, Leah and Bathsheba. The scribal interpretation is to read Genesis chs. 2 and 3 as a story that ultimately leads to a series of divine promises fulfilled by the coming to power of Solomon. Such power is legitimate for building community. If the limits of human knowledge and power are not respected community is violated.

response: Psalm 51 : 1 – 4a, 10 – 12, 15

[prayer for cleansing and pardon]

*Have mercy on me, O GOD,
 according to your steadfast love;
 according to your abundant mercy
 blot out my transgressions.(1)
 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity
 and cleanse me from my sin.(2)
 For I know my transgressions,
 and my sin is ever before me.(3)
 Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
 and done what is evil in your sight,(4a) . . .
 Create in me a clean heart, O GOD,
 and put a new and right spirit within me.(10)
 Do not cast me away from your presence,
 and do not take your holy spirit from me.(11)
 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
 and sustain in me a willing spirit.(12) . . .
 O LORD, open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise.(15)*

The song of people who stand before the LORD, guilty but unafraid. The speaker is not interested in theoretical or abstract questions of sin, death, evil, or the Fall. Abstract questions about the origin of these things are likely to be false, escapist and misleading. The issues of impurity, evil and death are used to focus on the LORD's purpose and the human response of trustful living. A true sense of sin has little to do with the infatuation usually associated with adolescent *bad thoughts*. Sin is quite ordinary and unspectacular. The first hopeful step towards divine mercy is having a true sense of sin. Like the characters in Genesis and the Psalm, our concern is not finally the danger of the Fall. It is GOD's call to us to be GOD's creatures, to live in GOD's world, on GOD's terms.

second reading: Romans 5 : 12 – 19

[Adam and Christ]

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned – (12) sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law.(13) Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.(14) But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of GOD and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many.(15) And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings

justification.(16) If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.(17) Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.(18) For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.(19)

Paul reflects on the sin of Adam,⁶ in the light of the redemptive mystery of Christ. Sin, as used in the singular by Paul, refers to the dreadful power that has gripped humanity, which is now in revolt against the Creator and engaged in the exaltation of its own desires and interests. But no one has a right to say, "*Adam made me do it,*" for all are culpable (v.12): Gentiles under the demands of the law written in their hearts,⁷ and Jews under the Mosaic covenant. Through the Old Testament law, the sinfulness of humanity that was operative from the beginning (v.13) found further stimulation, with the result that sins were generated in even greater abundance. According to Paul, GOD's act in Christ is in total contrast to the disastrous effects of the virus of sin that invaded humanity through Adam's crime.⁸

Paul uses *Genesis chs. 2 & 3* as another way of announcing '*the good news*' to the Israelite-Christian community at Rome. For Paul the old Adam is the cause of sin and death. Jesus is the new Adam, who is the cause of forgiveness and new life. Paul tries different arguments to impress the community at Rome with his interpretation of the GOD of faith. Death held sway from Adam to Moses(v.14). Adam and Moses had *the Torah* or *Law of Moses*. In Adam's case it was unwritten. But GOD's grace in Jesus is out of all proportion to the amount of sin that accumulated in history (vv.16-19). So an act of grace followed so many misdeeds and failures to honour the Torah of GOD. The graciousness of GOD, in the person of Jesus, the Christ, leads to acquittal. Just when sin multiplies, grace immeasurably exceeds it, according to Paul.

gospel reading: Matthew 4 : 1 – 11

[**the Temptation of Jesus**]

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.(1) He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.(2) The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of GOD, command these stones to become loaves of bread."(3) But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of GOD.'"(4) Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple,(5) saying to

⁶ *Gn.3:1-13*

⁷ *Cf. Rm. 2:14-15*

⁸ *Rm. 5:15-21*

him, "If you are the Son of GOD, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"(6) Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the LORD your GOD to the test.'"(7) Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour;(8) and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."(9) Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the LORD your GOD, and serve only him.'"(10) Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.(11)

Jesus must have faced testing times at the beginning of his work of announcing the reigning of GOD. Quite likely he was challenged to show signs to prove his identity. Under such pressure he adjusted his announcement of good news to the preconceptions and preoccupations of the people of his time. Matthew's account dramatises the sort of testing that Jesus must have undergone (vv.1-4). It reminds the listening community of the Israelite's desert experience. Soon after crossing the Sea of Reeds the people were hungry and tempted to go back to the regular work and security of Egypt. Matthew places Jesus in the same situation. But in a sharp contrast with the Israelites, Jesus trusts in GOD.

The '*temptation*' of the Devil is to perform a miracle that would be good news only for Jesus himself. Later Jesus performs the sign of giving bread to many thousands of people. In the testing scene, Jesus is dealing with a selfish, useless gesture. While bread is food, people need the bread of love; the WORD of Scripture and the Food of Eucharist. The WORD of GOD is our bread too. In our society some have food and others do not. If there is love and true community, the food is shared and all eat. If there isn't any love, although there may be a lot of food, people go hungry because some people will hoard. Hearing and acting on the WORD of GOD transforms that reality.

Jesus claimed that he lived on every word that came from the mouth of GOD (v.4). The Devil gives Jesus such a word and tempts him to put GOD's WORD to the test (vv.5-7). Matthew again contrasts Jesus' action with the ancient Israelite's actions in the desert, where they tried to manipulate the LORD. For Jesus being heir to GOD does not mean trying to manipulate GOD to fit his own purposes. True dependence on GOD, is doing GOD's will. The Devil took Jesus up to the Jerusalem temple (v.5) just as he seizes many of us and lifts us to certain positions of power and status. To the powerful comes the temptation to push the weak around. A show of spectacular power (like throwing himself down from the Temple unharmed) may be impressive but Jesus refused to be that kind of Messiah. Later he would go up to the Temple in

Jerusalem, during the festival – but in a different way. It was part of the mythology of the time, that Satan (the Devil) was "*the prince of this world*" permitted by GOD to exercise power until GOD chose the Day and established the new Age. The Devil offers this power to Jesus (vv.8-11). Jesus' response is to quote *the Book of Deuteronomy*.⁹ The people worshipped Satan but Jesus trusted in the LORD – on the LORD's terms – and not on his own terms.¹⁰ Jesus faces the temptation to side with the spirit of individualism and take the side of death. The Devil is a symbol of pride, of haughtiness, of the power of people over other people. This is the nature of the power of evil. This is what Satan gives to people and what Satan offers Jesus. Jesus rejects the offer.¹¹

for sharing:¹²

- *GOD's work; the first sin and its punishment. Comment on Genesis 2 : 7 – 9 & 3 : 1 – 7*
- *Adam and Christ. Comment on Romans 5 : 12 – 19*
- *The Temptation of Jesus. Comment on Matthew 4 : 1 – 11*

9 Dt.6:13

10 This devil, like many of our modern politicians, makes all kinds of lavish promises so people will vote for him (The devil must be masculine!). People do vote and afterwards they (our modern politicians and the devil) do not deliver on their promises. The devil is a symbol of the power of death, which in our world today is the ideology (theology) of the free market. The seductive power of consumerism offers modern people everything if they obey its precepts of selfish individualism.

11 The three testings are a single testing - that Jesus present himself as the commanding and triumphant Messiah the Israelites were expecting. This would be a real temptation for Jesus. But he rejects it sensing that true liberation had to come through suffering and death. Later, when they asked him for a sign, Jesus told them that the only sign he would give them was the "sign of Jonah" - his death and resurrection after three days (cf Mt. 12:38-40)!

12 Lectio Divina: reading GOD's WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio* (reading) – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio* (reflection) – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in GOD's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio* (prayer) – allow your heart to speak to GOD, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio* (rest) – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of GOD, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: '*Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them*'

prayer: ¹³

*LORD our GOD, in every age You call a people
to hear Your WORD and to do your will.*

Renew us in these Lenten days:

*washed clean of sin, sealed with the Spirit,
and sustained by Your living bread,
may we remain true to our calling
and, with the elect, serve You alone.*

*Grant this through Christ, our liberator from sin,
who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
holy and mighty GOD, now and always. Amen.*

review: ¹⁴

Who do we listen to? Is it easier to hear the voice of the tempter than to listen to the voice of Christ? Do we hear our own needs, or do we discern the voice of the poor? Jesus was alone in the desert. In our context, being alone in the desert might be equivalent to existing in the midst of other people but feeling isolated or disconnected. What voices do we listen to in our society? How do we remain open to the authentic voice of the Spirit? How do we consider more deeply and more carefully what GOD is saying to us? How do we make time for careful listening to GOD? As followers of Jesus, we are committed to put our faith into action. What is the one action I commit to undertake, either by myself or together with other members of the community, as a result of our reflection and discussion on the WORD of GOD in this the beginning week of the Lenten season?

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13 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

14 The review – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the WORD and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.