

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

First Sunday of Lent

Year A

26 February 2023



Collect

Grant, almighty God,
through the yearly observances of holy Lent,
that we may grow in understanding
of the riches hidden in Christ
and by worthy conduct pursue their effects.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

“Be off, Satan!” Jesus’ curt dismissal of the tempter has a parallel later in the gospel. At Caesarea Philippi Jesus sharply rebukes Peter in much the same words: “Get behind me, Satan!” (16:23). What prompted this blunt rebuff? Peter’s attempt to dissuade Jesus from his acceptance of suffering and death. Later still, but in the same vein, the crowd and religious leaders will tempt Jesus to save himself and come down from the cross (27:39-44).

In the Genesis story, the first woman and man succumb to the temptation to eat the fruit of “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil”. Opinions differ as to exactly what this means, but the story suggests that their transgression was fuelled by a desire for god-like autonomy. To put it another way, they were rebelling against the human condition. This is what Jesus consistently refuses to do. He embraced his humanity, even to death on the cross.

Is this the fundamental temptation we face – to have god-like control over our daily lives and our destiny? Jesus shows us another way.

A reading from the book of Genesis

2:7–9, 3:1–7

The Lord God fashioned man of dust from the soil. Then he breathed into his nostrils a breath of life, and thus man became a living being.

The Lord God planted a garden in Eden which is in the east, and there he put the man he had fashioned. The Lord God caused to spring up from the soil every kind of tree, enticing to look at and good to eat, with the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the middle of the garden.

The serpent was the most subtle of all the wild beasts that the Lord God had made. It asked the woman, 'Did God really say you were not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?' The woman answered the serpent, 'We may eat the fruit of the trees in the garden. But of the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden God said, "You must not eat it, nor touch it, under pain of death".' Then the serpent said to the woman, 'No! You will not die! God knows in fact that on the day you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil.' The woman saw that the tree was good to eat and pleasing to the eye, and that it was desirable for the knowledge that it could give. So she took some of its fruit and ate it. She gave some also to her husband who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they realised that they were naked. So they sewed fig-leaves together to make themselves loin-cloths.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 50:3–6, 12–14, 17

R. Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness.

In your compassion blot out my offence.

O wash me more and more from my guilt and cleanse me from my sin. **R.**

My offences truly I know them;

my sin is always before me.

Against you, you alone, have I sinned;
what is evil in your sight I have done. **R.**

A pure heart create for me, O God,

put a steadfast spirit within me.

Do not cast me away from your presence,
nor deprive me of your holy spirit. **R.**

Give me again the joy of your help;

with a spirit of fervour sustain me.

O Lord, open my lips

and my mouth shall declare your praise. **R.**

First Reading

The very first reading of the Sundays of Lent presents us with age-old and ever-present questions. How did the world come to be? What is humankind's relationship with God? What is man's relationship with woman? How do we make moral choices? What is it to be self-conscious?

The book of Genesis offers no conclusive answer to these sorts of questions. Instead it tells stories for us to inhabit and explore. Today's reading yokes together two parts of one of these stories. Unlike the majestic account we hear at the Paschal Vigil, this older story of creation begins with man being fashioned from the dust of the earth. The garden of paradise is created, then in verses we don't hear, animals and finally woman.

We rejoin the story with the episode of the fall. It's somewhat like a folk tale. It introduces but does not explain the figure of the serpent. This crafty creature slides along the boundaries of the animal, the human and the divine, and especially between truth and falsehood. The story weaves together animated dialogue, dramatic action, and a consequential outcome but offers no conclusive answers to our questions. What was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? Why was eating its fruit forbidden? Where did the serpent come from? Why did eating from the tree expose their nakedness?

This is a foundational story which gives readers the privilege of launching the Lenten journey. It is full of energy, colour and significance. It deserves to be prepared well and delivered with a fine balance of liveliness and solemnity.

Responsorial Psalm

The responsorial psalm for today, and the commentary, are the same as for Ash Wednesday. In contrast to the broad human scope of the Genesis story, Psalm 50/51 is almost entirely an individual's confession of sin and plea for forgiveness. The six other psalms known as "penitential" also focus on the individual. The most well-known of them are today's psalm and Psalm 129/130, "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord".

Diverse verses have been selected from Psalm 50/51 to make up the responsorial psalm. The response is sourced from the original psalm but it has been changed from the singular to the plural. This slight but significant alteration creates a link with the communal repentance stressed in the reading from Joel.

The psalm shifts backwards and forwards between consciousness of personal guilt and recognition of God's goodness. In the process there's a twofold confession – a confession of sin and a confession of faith. The psalmist puts faith in God's kindness and compassion and also in God's desire to impart a spirit of joy. The nature of the psalm calls for a delivery that is prayerful, sincere and heartfelt. This will encourage the assembly to make the response a contrite confession of their own.

**A reading from the letter of St Paul
to the Romans**

5:12–19

Sin entered the world through one man, and through sin death, and thus death has spread through the whole human race because everyone has sinned. [Sin existed in the world long before the Law was given. There was no law and so no one could be accused of the sin of 'law-breaking', yet death reigned over all from Adam to Moses, even though their sin, unlike that of Adam, was not a matter of breaking a law.

Adam prefigured the One to come, but the gift itself considerably outweighed the fall. If it is certain that through one man's fall so many died, it is even more certain that divine grace, coming through the one man, Jesus Christ, came to so many as an abundant free gift. The results of the gift also outweigh the results of one man's sin: for after one single fall came judgement with a verdict of condemnation, now after many falls comes grace with its verdict of acquittal.] If it is certain that death reigned over everyone as the consequence of one man's fall, it is even more certain that one man, Jesus Christ, will cause everyone to reign in life who receives the free gift that he does not deserve, of being made righteous. Again, as one man's fall brought condemnation on everyone, so the good act of one man brings everyone life and makes them justified. As by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous.

[Short Form: omit text in brackets.]

**A reading from the holy Gospel
according to Matthew**

4:1–11

Jesus was led by the Spirit out into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, after which he was very hungry, and the tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to turn into loaves.' But he replied, 'Scripture says:

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

The devil then took him to the holy city and made him stand on the parapet of the Temple. 'If you are the Son of God,' he said, 'throw yourself down; for scripture says:

He will put you in his angels' charge,
and they will support you on their hands
in case you hurt your foot against a stone.'

Jesus said to him, 'Scripture also says:

You must not put the Lord your God to the test.'

Next, taking him to a very high mountain, the devil showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. 'I will give you all these', he said, 'if you fall at my feet and worship me.' Then Jesus replied, 'Be off, Satan! For scripture says:

You must worship the Lord your God,
and serve him alone.'

Then the devil left him, and angels appeared and looked after him.

Second Reading

After the first reading's engaging narrative of the fall, we now grapple with a sustained and complex theological argument from Paul. The essence of his thought is simple enough. It's the contrast between Adam (a name meaning "man") and Christ. Adam sinned, as did everyone after him, bringing death and condemnation to all. Christ obeyed, bringing grace, acquittal, life and righteousness to all. It's an "a fortiori" case: how much greater and more beneficial for everyone are the consequences of Christ's action in comparison with Adam's. A new humanity and a new creation have come into being.

While this can be stated plainly enough, Paul's busy mind keeps generating fresh ideas or new ways of making his point. It makes him prone to digression and repetition. This fertility of thought has produced a text that is overloaded. By omitting some of the asides that flow from Paul's opening sentence, the shorter version of the reading is easier to follow, though it still contains some long and elaborate sentences.

If the longer version is to be used, readers have their work cut out to untangle the rhetoric. Each sentence needs to be studied to determine where the emphasis is to be laid and where pauses and a variation of tone are needed to help the assembly follow Paul's line of thought. This is certainly one of those readings that needs the whole range of readers' strategies – study, prayer, perhaps writing the text out in short lines as in the NRSV lectionary, and more than one rehearsal.

Gospel

In a sense Matthew gives the game away right at the start. Jesus, he writes, was "led by the Spirit into the wilderness". This is the Spirit who has just descended on the newly baptised Jesus. Matthew is assuring his readers that, whatever is to follow, it will occur under the power of the Spirit.

There's a second connection between Jesus' baptism and the temptations. A voice from heaven has just testified, "This is my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on him". It is in accord with this declaration that Jesus deals with the devil's enticements. He responds as God's beloved Son, in contrast to the Chosen People who repeatedly lost confidence in God's covenant love on their forty-year journey out of Egypt.

Many details of this story – the number forty, the fasting, the three temptations, the scripture quotations – evoke the exodus and Moses. One of Matthew's concerns in his gospel is to present Jesus as the new Moses. Here Jesus draws on the Torah to rebuff the devil. A little later in the gospel, when Jesus delivers the Sermon on the Mount, he will give his own authoritative interpretation of the Law and the Prophets.

As familiar as it may be, the story of the temptations retains its capacity to engage. Once the scene is set, the interactions between Jesus and his antagonist are charged with energy. The story gathers momentum until the duel comes to its peaceful resolution.

Concluding Prayer

Prayer over the People (First Sunday of Lent)

May bountiful blessing, O Lord, we pray,
come down upon us, your people,
that hope may grow in tribulation,
virtue be strengthened in temptation,
and eternal redemption be assured.
Through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

And may the blessing of almighty God,
the Father, and the Son, + and the Holy Spirit,
come down on us and remain with us for ever.

Amen.

(Adapted from the Prayer over the People for the First Sunday of Lent, Roman Missal p. 243)