

1st Sunday in Lent - A

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Genesis 2:7-9, 3:1-7

The Book of Genesis (Greek for “origin”) records the creation of the world and our first parents, and the origin of sin; the history of mankind from the time of Noah; the Flood; the tower of Babel; the confusion of languages, and the division of the human race. The author then turns to the descendants of Shem, the eldest (firstborn) son of Noah, and deals with the greatest of these descendants, Abraham, the father of the chosen people. Then follows the history of Abraham’s son Isaac, of Esau’s forfeiture of his birthright blessing, and the succession of Jacob. Jacob’s fortunes are next related in detail. Lastly, the personal history of Joseph is told, and the migration of his father Jacob (Israel) and his brethren into the land of Egypt.

For almost 3,300 years the authorship of Genesis (along with the other four books that make up the Pentateuch) was attributed to Moses by both Jewish and Christian tradition. Although significant questions about his authorship were raised at points along the way, it was not until the 18th century that the question was seriously broached. Today it is commonplace that he did not write these books (at least not every part of them), but who the other authors might have been is unknown. At the time of Jesus, it was accepted that Moses was the author.

The primeval history, from which our reading for today comes, marks a significant beginning in that it underscores Israel’s own understanding of itself against the background of world history. In our reading today, the essential goodness of creation stands in stark contrast to human disobedience.

2:7 The LORD God formed man out of the clay of the ground

The Hebrew word for “man” is *adam* and the Hebrew word for “clay of the ground” is *adama*.

and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and so man became a living being.

The Hebrew word *ruah* means “spirit” or “wind” or “breath”. Man has a special kind of life which distinguishes him from all other animals; a life that comes from God.

⁸ Then the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and he placed there the man whom he had formed. ⁹ Out of the ground the LORD God made various trees grow that were delightful to look at and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and bad.

The tree of the knowledge of good and bad is the only tree in the garden from which Adam cannot eat as we are told in verse 17. Woman is then made in verse 22.

3:1 Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the animals that the LORD God had made.

Some commentators hold that the word “subtle” in Hebrew shares the same root as “naked.” The play on words alluded to is *erumin* (naked) and *arum* (subtle). This play on words, if intended, is secondary to the story itself. The serpent is a creature made by God. Tradition has it that Satan was a fallen angel, probably a seraph (seraphim), the highest choir of angels. Seraphs are described in Isaiah 6:2 as winged. They are described as fiery serpents in Numbers 21:6. Satan is described in Revelation 12 as a dragon, a serpent with wings. One who has his wings folded, or has lost them, looks like a snake.

The serpent asked the woman, "Did God really tell you not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?"

The serpent’s question is a distortion of the divine command – it makes it sound like an unwarranted restriction that deserves a reply if conversation is to be maintained.

² The woman answered the serpent: "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³ it is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, 'You shall not eat it or even touch it, lest you die.'"

The woman corrects the serpent’s distortion, but adds a distortion of her own. The command given the man by God was simply “not to eat of the tree” (Genesis 2:17). Hebrew legend has it that the man had forbidden the woman to touch the tree because of his zeal to guard her against the transgressing of the Divine command. This original sin begins with some distortion of the truth on the part of both Satan and mankind.

⁴ But the serpent said to the woman: "You certainly will not die!"

Satan refers to a physical death rather than a spiritual one.

⁵ No, God knows well that the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know what is good and what is bad."

You will have a knowledge of both good and evil. Up until this point only good has been experienced.

⁶ The woman saw that the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom. So she took some of its fruit and ate it; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

She didn’t have to hunt him down, he was right alongside her. Genesis 2:15 tells us that God

commanded the man to “till and keep” the garden. The Hebrew word *shammar* translated as “keep” can also be translated as “guard” (keep safe). If the man is to guard, there must be something to guard against. The man is standing alongside the woman and fails to keep her safe. It was not the woman who committed the first sin, but the man who failed in his duty to guard her. What should the man have done? He should have taken the serpent to task, done battle with it to defend his family; a battle which may well have cost the man his physical life. How do we know this? Because this is exactly what Jesus, the second Adam, did. “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13).

⁷ Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Their nakedness becomes an occasion for shame; something which was impossible before the sin. Since they were at the tree of knowledge of good and evil, this tree must have been a fig – a tree which is used later in the Old and New Testaments as a symbol of Israel and Jerusalem. Hebrew legend also tells us that the fig was the forbidden fruit itself.

2nd Reading - Romans 5:12-19

Written by Paul from Corinth around the year 58, this is the most morally instructive of all his letters and also the most doctrinally profound. It is also very beautifully written, from a stylistic point of view. It contains a summary (naturally, an incomplete one) of Christian teaching, starting with the Old Covenant and an outline of God’s plans for man’s salvation after the fall of our first parents.

The letter is explicitly addressed to the Christians at Rome, whom Paul plans to visit on his way to Spain (a trip he never completed as once he got to Rome, he never left). He writes to preach the Gospel of God, for that is the mission to which God has called him; in particular he writes to the Christians at Rome “whose faith is proclaimed in all the world”; most of whom are Gentile converts. They are being told by Jews resident in Rome that salvation comes through the Law of Moses; whereas they had been taught that it was based on faith in Jesus the Christ, and that it was not necessary to keep the Mosaic Law. Paul feels that they need a more theological induction into that Christian teaching which they have already accepted and this is what he now gives them, at the same time announcing his forthcoming visit.

In our reading today, Saint Paul explains how the new Christian life brings about freedom from sin and death. Paul does this by comparing Adam, the first parent, with Christ, the head of the new humanity (the new Adam). He reflects on the sin of Adam (our 1st reading) in the light of the redemptive mystery of Christ. Sin, as addressed here by Saint Paul, refers to the dreadful power which has gripped humanity and is even now in revolt against the Creator and engaged in the exaltation of its own desires and interests.

¹² Therefore, just as through one person sin entered the world,

The emphasis on the “one man” continues throughout this reading, occurring eight times. The

contrast between one man and all brings out the universality of what is involved here. Paul affirms the existence of hereditary sin. The Council of Carthage (A.D. 418) gave a definitive interpretation to this text in the sense that Paul's words teach a form of the dogma of Original Sin. It is one of only seven scripture texts that enjoys a dogmatic interpretation.

and through sin, death, and thus death came to all, inasmuch as all sinned –

Not merely physical, bodily death (separation of body and soul), but also including spiritual death (the separation of human beings from God, the source of life). That "all" includes infants is a precision which was born of later controversy. The Council of Trent included infants and thus the necessity of infant baptism, which had been practiced for sixteen centuries before it was seriously questioned.

"Everyone, even little children, have broken God's covenant, not indeed in virtue of any personal action but in virtue of mankind's common origin in that single ancestor in whom all have sinned." [Saint Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 413-426), *The City of God* 16,27]

"When a man is born, he is already born with death, because he contracts sin from Adam." [Saint Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 416), *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 49,12,2]

¹³ for up to the time of the law, sin was in the world, though sin is not accounted when there is no law.

From Adam to Moses, the source of death was Adam's sin: men did, of course, commit evil deeds, but they were not charged with them because the Law had not yet been given them. The Law is the first five books of the Bible, which according to Hebrew and Christian tradition were written by Moses.

¹⁴ But death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who did not sin after the pattern of the trespass of Adam, who is the type of the one who was to come.

Note he refers to Adam's sin, not Eve's. As we learned in our first reading, the first sin was the failure to guard. Disobedience.

"Sin was in the world before the Law of Moses came, and it was counted, though not according to that Law. Rather, it was counted according to the law of nature, by which we have learned to distinguish good and evil. This was the law of which Paul spoke above (Romans 2:14)." [Diodore of Tarsus (ca. A.D. 373), *Pauline Commentary From the Greek Church*]

¹⁵ But the gift is not like the transgression. For if by that one person's transgression the many died, how much more did the grace of God and the gracious gift of the one person Jesus Christ overflow for the many.

The gift of Jesus Christ was made to all mankind.

¹⁶ And the gift is not like the result of the one person's sinning. For after one sin there was the

judgment that brought condemnation; but the gift, after many transgressions, brought acquittal.

This second mode contrasts the verdict of condemnation for one sin, which fell on all men, with the verdict of acquittal for men condemned not only through Adam's transgression, but also through their own offenses.

¹⁷ For if, by the transgression of one person, death came to reign through that one, how much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of justification come to reign in life through the one person Jesus Christ.

Death came through one man, Adam, and the gift of upright life is obtained through one man, Jesus the Christ

"There is an obvious difference between the fact that those who have sinned in imitation of Adam's transgression have been condemned and the fact that the grace of God in Christ has justified men not from one trespass but from many sins, giving them forgiveness of sins." [The Ambrosiaster (A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles*]

¹⁸ In conclusion, just as through one transgression condemnation came upon all, so through one righteous act acquittal and life came to all. ¹⁹ For just as through the disobedience of one person the many were made sinners, so through the obedience of one the many will be made righteous.

The formal effect of Adam's disobedience was to make mankind not only liable to punishment, but actually made us sinners. Adam's disobedience placed the mass of mankind in a condition of estrangement from God. "*many will be made righteous*" most likely refers to the final judgment, when the final phase of the process of justification will be achieved in glory. From Adam we get a sinful nature, but from Christ we get a righteous nature.

Gospel - Matthew 4:1-11

After his baptism and before the start of his public ministry, Jesus was tempted by Satan in the desert. Today we hear of this temptation. Obedience to the Father is a characteristic of true sonship. The individual temptations related here are not as bizarre as they appear at first glance, they are all based on temptations to which the Israelites had succumbed during their forty years in the desert. In each case, Jesus goes to the section of Deuteronomy where Moses recounts these temptations and the correct response.

¹ Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.

Probably the desert of Judea; a steep slope that falls from the central ridge of the country to the valley of the Jordan and the Dead Sea. Jebel Qaranthal, named after the forty days, lies to the west of Jericho and is traditionally associated with the mount of temptation.

² He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was hungry.

Moses spent forty days and forty nights fasting on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:18). Israel spent forty years in the desert being tempted and failing. The number 40 in Hebrew numerology indicates a time of transition or change.

³ The tempter approached and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread." ⁴ He said in reply, "It is written: 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.'"

Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 8:3. The Israelites had been hungry in the desert and had rebelled.

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city, and made him stand on the parapet of the temple, ⁶ 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.'"

Satan quotes Psalm 91:11-12.

⁷ Jesus answered him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.'"

Jesus responds by quoting Deuteronomy 6:16. Massah is so called because at this place the Israelites put God to the test (Exodus 17:7).

⁸ Then the devil took him up to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence,

This mountain does not exist in nature, it is a vision; although Jebel Qaranthal has been associated with it in legend.

⁹ and he said to him, "All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me."

The temptation is to use political power to accomplish the ends of the Messianic Mission.

¹⁰ 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.'" ¹¹ Then the devil left him and, behold, angels came and ministered to him.

Jesus dismisses Satan and quotes Deuteronomy 6:13, another test the Israelites had failed in the desert.