

FIRST SUNDAY

OF LENT

YEAR A



Prayer

Psalm 51:3–6, 12–13, 17

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

Reading the Word

First Reading:

Genesis 2:7–9, 3:1–7

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. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. 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.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 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.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” 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. 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.

FIRST READING

Genesis 2:7–9, 3:1–7

PSALM

Psalm 51:3–6, 12–13, 177

SECOND READING

Romans 5:12–19

GOSPEL

Matthew 4:1–11

Second Reading:

Romans 5:12–19

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— sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. 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.

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. 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. 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.

*Scripture quotations from
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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. 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.

Gospel: Matthew 4:1-11

Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to 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.' Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Hearing the Word

"Trustful Obedience"

The first Sunday of the Season of Lent invites reflection on the theme of life-giving obedience.

The first reading comes from the opening chapters of the first book of the Bible, Genesis, which describe the origins of humankind. To describe this beginning, the author uses two different stories which, when read in conjunction, offer a profound insight into the nature of human beings in their relationship to God, to one another and to nature. Today's first reading contains the second of these stories, which presents humanity as the very first fruit of God's creating activities. The story then sketches out God's careful preparation of the living-space for humanity – planting the garden with trees full of delightful fruits and watering the earth abundantly. All is set and prepared to allow life to flourish. Humanity is created to exist in a special relationship with God, since it is animated by God's own "breath of life". This indicates the profound dependence of human life on God. Losing "God's breath" would mean the absence of that which makes a person alive and it would end in death.

Another aspect of this vital dependence on God, was the obedience to God's prohibition regarding eating from the tree of knowledge. This prohibition reflected a certain order and boundaries in creation, which humans are to respect in their own best interest. God forbade the first human beings to eat of the tree of knowledge, because it was something that they were not designed for. This was knowledge that humanity could not handle; it would

destroy them and dramatically disrupt the harmony of God's creation.

Unfortunately, the first people violated God's life-giving command. A detailed description of events that led to breaking God's command in Gen 3, shows the reason for this destructive disobedience. The story states that the first people lost the awareness of God's gift. Instead, they treated God's command not to eat the forbidden fruit, as an intrusive restriction. The conversation between the woman and the snake reveals an undue focus on the limits set by God, completely overlooking the good intention that underlined God's command. God's statement which the woman quoted, "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", must have been told to her by the man, to whom these words were earlier addressed (cf. Gen 2:16-17). There is no sense of gratitude for all the other gifts, all the other fruits of the garden and the harmony they could enjoy. The first people accepted this distorted image of God, suggested to them by the tempter, and chose to act against God. Their violation of the restrictions placed upon them by God had disastrous consequences. First, it led to the opening of their eyes, and the recognition "that they were naked." Their lack of trust that the limits set by God are for their own good and protection, led to distortion of their own relationships. Humans experienced their "nakedness" which symbolizes weakness and vulnerability, which from that moment will be their daily experience. The result of the disobedience

was the disruption of the harmonious relationship that the first people had with God, and among themselves.

Paul's exposition on the faithful's new situation as made righteous through God's grace "in Christ" occupies a major part of his letter to the Romans. In today's reading he contrasts Adam, the first parent and the "new Adam" – Christ. His reasoning is complex, but it rests on a simple contrast between the situation of "sin" resulting in "death", and the state of "grace/gift" bringing "righteousness" and "life". The first one is linked with Adam and his "trespass", while the second one with Jesus Christ. The key difference between Adam and Christ in Paul's thinking is obedience. The disobedience of Adam makes "sinners" taste death. This death is experienced in disorder and the corruption of mutual relations. In contrast, the obedience of Christ restored the condition of "righteousness" – the right relationship to God and others. This restoration of the right relationship for those who were once slaves to sin takes place through immersion "in Christ" through baptism. Receiving this grace of inclusion into Christ as a gift, believers are exhorted to adhere to the obedience of Jesus himself. Right and harmonious relationships were destroyed by the first sin. Christ restored these relationships through his obedience to God.

In the Gospel narrative the scene of Jesus' temptation follows immediately after the scene of his baptism. At his baptism Jesus was called God's beloved son. In the desert, faced with the deceptions of Satan, he proved his faithfulness and obedience to the Father,

resisting the tempter three times. The experience of Jesus in the desert lasts "forty days and forty nights", which evokes the journey of Israel from Egypt. After crossing the Red Sea, the people faced the desert and its temptations. Their complaint about the lack of bread (Exod 16) is echoed in the first temptation of Jesus. Their questioning of God's saving presence (Exod 17) is seen in the second temptation. Finally, worship of the molten calf (Exod 32) is reflected in the third temptation. The Israelites failed to trust and obey God who rescued them from slavery. Jesus, at the very beginning of his public ministry confronted the same type of challenges as they did, but showed himself faithful and obedient. Building on the word of God and in trusting obedience, he overcame the traps of the tempter. As the obedient Son who would carry out God's will, he would become the foundation of God's new people, a faithful new Israel whose life is sustained by trustful and life giving obedience, modeled on the example of Jesus himself.

The First Sunday of Lent emphasizes the life-giving and sustaining role of trust and obedience. The first people chose not to trust God. By disobeying his command, they plunged themselves, and the entire human race, into chaos and disorder. Jesus, on the contrary, chose obedience based on trust in his Father's purposes and promises. He fulfilled his mission in the world faithfully. Paul evaluated both of these responses, concluding that Jesus' obedience brought life to the world, while Adam's disobedience introduced disruption and death. This choice and tension

between mistrust and trust, between waywardness and obedience, remains a constant challenge for God's faithful. Faced with it, they need to continually join in with the Psalmist in his plea, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me".

Listening to the Word of God

Before starting on any journey, adequate preparation is necessary in order to reach the destination. As we begin our Lenten journey, the liturgy of the first Sunday invites us to prepare for this season by setting a fundamental goal that will guide our choices, and will enable us to overcome all the hardships and challenges. This goal is to become persons who live in trusting obedience to God our Father, and thus grow to become ever more people of integrity and dignity. Achieving such goal requires reflection followed by decisive choices.

Changing anything in one's life is always a challenge. We have to be prepared to make critical judgments on our life, followed by choices implemented with strength and determination. Without decisiveness we will fail, and can even fall into deeper problems. As the African proverb says "a lazy man's farm is the breeding ground for snakes". Therefore, as we begin Lent we have to make firm decisions in the direction of personal conversion and spiritual renewal. To attain our goals, we need to be courageous, and strong both physically and spiritually. A good place to begin is to look at our daily life and ask what bad habits and attitudes do we need to work on and change? What are some harmful behaviors that plunge us into addictions

and other destructive vices? In this Lenten season let us look at our daily attitudes and behaviors because they reflect who we really are.

Our efforts, however, cannot be just a matter of choosing this or that attitude or behavior. Changing life begins with a deeply rooted relationship with God. And that relationship is not about simply complying with his instructions and commands. Change begins with trusting God and loving him. The first people in Eden failed, because they did not trust God sufficiently. It was their lack of trust and confidence in God that led to disobedience, and that led to a bad choice, eventually resulting in death. The same applies to us today. Our Lenten journey must begin with examining of our attitude towards God. Do I have enough trust and confidence in my creator and his love and care for me? One way to answer that question is to look at the way I live – do my attitudes and behaviors reflect that I trust in God and follow his ways?

As Christians today we face many temptations that lead us away from God. We have even less time to pray, or to read scripture. For many of us, seeking pleasure and having fun has replaced God in our daily life. Many prefer watching football on a Sunday, rather than attending Church. Spending time in shops and cinemas has replaced family and community time. Yet, loss of contact with God, leads to a loss of trust and confidence in him, and that inevitably leads to making wrong choices.

It would be good therefore, at the beginning of this Lent, to examine ourselves and see what

undermines our trust and confidence in God. These are the real sources of our failures in life. True fasting is about abandoning such things. On the positive side, during Lent we have a perfect opportunity to focus on activities that lead us closer to our creator: prayer, scripture reading, and works of charity. For this period, let us choose a life of dependence on God in faithfulness. Doing this we will be able to withstand temptation, and we will be like Jesus in saying “Away with you, Satan!

Proverb

“A lazy
man’s
farm
is the
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ing
ground
for
snakes.”

Action

Self-examination

What habits and attitudes undermine my trust and confidence in God?

How much time do I spend in God’s presence through prayer and scripture reading?

Response to God

I will pray daily for the grace of drawing ever closer to my Lord and God and for strength to live my life in trusting obedience to Him.

Response to your World

In this first week of Lent I will identify and fast from bad habits and attitudes that isolate me from God.

As a group, we shall determine one activity that will show that we choose life through trusting obedience to God, and implement it.

Prayer

Lord, save us from temptations and, if they come, grant us the necessary strength and grace to overcome them.

Guide us into the pathways of total trust and obedience as we make choices that will enhance our life in this community.

Give us the grace and fidelity to be obedient to you, our creator God.

We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.