

First Sunday in Lent

MMXIX

Somewhere along the line the Western Church decided that Lent would be defined by three spiritual disciplines; it was to be a season for fasting, for prayer, and for giving alms to the poor. But while these can be godly acts, and do in fact reflect the words of Christ in Matthew 6, it is a huge mistake to define Lent in terms of ourselves and what we do. Think for a moment, Lent need not even be a Christian thing at all, if what we focus most upon is how diligently we pray, how earnestly we fast, or how generously we give.

Lent should be, first of all, about Christ and the Gospel – about what he has done for us and where he has brought us. Then, if we wish to offer something, it will be our way of thanking God for, and our way of imitating, the Lord who redeemed us. And so today, as it has done for a very long time, Lent I's Gospel starts us off with Christ scoring a victory where the first Adam crashed and burned – in the face of temptation.

Today's spiritual lesson, therefore, is simply this: Never forget who you are. Was Jesus, hungry and thirsty, nonetheless the Son of God? Of course he was. Did the deprivations he was undergoing, and the bodily weakness he was suffering, mean that he had been stripped of his glory? Did being driven into the wilderness mean that God had taken back from him the destiny of rising from death to rule as Lord at his right hand? No, it did not.

So, all that Jesus had to bear in mind was that these ordeals of the flesh in the wilderness were given to him as proofs of who he was. His hungering in the desert was only the first battle in the war by which he would defeat the devil and liberate the sons and daughters of Adam who otherwise would lie hopeless under the devil's power. The conquering Lamb of Sacrifice, the royal servant of God whose first crown would be thorns, and whose first throne would be the cross – Our Lord, in every way tempted as we are in our human flesh, knew that wisdom under pressure means knowing who you are in the plans of God for his beloved.

Who are you? Who I am? The answer for the Christian is a double-answer: In

terms of flesh & blood we remain the children of Adam and Eve and bear all the signs that this is true: our will and our reason are both infected by sin, and our bodies are aging and moving toward death. But through Christ Jesus we are no longer that person. The Lord who died for us now lives in us. There resides in each of us, so to speak, both the old self and the Holy Spirit's new creation.

One sign that this is true, sadly enough, is how easily we become double-minded. We all do this: We denounce in others, we reject in ourselves, various sins that, nevertheless, we continue to find attractive. Duplicity is one thing: duplicity means intentionally presenting yourself as one thing in order to succeed at being something else – feigning goodness to accomplish wickedness. Double-mindedness is different: We know perfectly well that sinning in this way or that shall anger God and bring us not happiness but sorrow. Yet, we still succumb to the temptation and let our stupid, sinful desire govern our choice.

Just how great God's grace is we learn when God does not cast us off when this happens. When we know perfectly well that we have answered his goodness to us by disobeying him, dishonoring ourselves, and hurting others, he still calls to us, "Come back. Come and be healed." And he truly does forgive us.

But do you also not yearn to know how to resist the devil more consistently, to fight back better against temptation? If you were truly sorry for the sins that God has forgiven, then you will not view his mercy as the opportunity to transgress in the future. Instead, a man or woman genuinely repentant and forgiven longs to know, "Lord, how can I grow in eagerness and strength to turn my back on the Tempter and to follow in your steps?"

Now we come to the traditional Latin name for this Sunday, a name which comes from Psalm 91 and serves as the opening line of the Introit:

He will call upon me, and I will answer him.

Question: Why did God tell Abraham his name, saying:

I am Yahweh who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this country as your possession.

Why did God tell Moses nine times before the Hebrew slaves left Egypt:

I am Yahweh...

Why does the Lord give out his name to those he has called to be his servants? He desires and expects the to use it. And what do we call it when people speak God's name and then proceed to talk to him? Prayer. The Sundays of Lent open with an Antiphon that reminds us: staying close to God begins with calling upon his name in every trouble, praying, and then rendering him thanks and praise.

There is godly prayer, and there is ungodly prayer – the undisciplined complaints from the mouth of someone who steadfastly ignores God's Word but then figures it cannot hurt to see if God may give them what they want. Godly prayer, modeled after the Our Father, means above all praying for the things God wants to happen – both in ourselves and in the world.

Even more specifically, godly prayer means not wondering if God will be good enough to give you the things you want in the way you so wisely know you need them. Speak from your heart, call on him boldly, don't be timid. But then, in humility ask your heavenly Father to keep you in close to him in faith and hope, while he in his own ways and in his own time acts as only his wisdom knows is best for you.

Vital to praying in this way, therefore, is remembering that in this world, which itself is passing away even as I speak, every child of God is a sojourner. The 40 years spent by Israel in the wilderness served to symbolize the greater truth: all of earthly life is pilgrimage to our real home. The 40 days of Christ in the wilderness serves the same way: Your whole life between baptism and burial is essentially a series of trials that God uses to prove that

...your faith, more valuable than gold ... may be proved, to your praise and honor, when Jesus Christ is revealed.

As a season of repentance, Lent is about rediscovering authentic living, regaining genuine life. For the less we have come to pray and to meditation God's Word, the less alive we have become. The road back to God is not through fasting or almsgiving – though those may grow as fruits of a renewed faith. The road back to God, instead, begins with remembering who you are – both owning up to your

persistent sinfulness as a fallen creature, but also reclaiming the new self that the Holy spirit has created you to be in Christ.

And to remember who you are is to remember your destination – which is not in or of this world. You are in Christ, in him who came to be your flesh-and blood brother, and who has been raised up to God's right hand in glory – a glory toward the sharing of which your days on earth are aimed. What ever else there is for which you pray on his day or that, ask every day that you know how to

conduct yourself with fear throughout the time of your exile...

until you come into your true inheritance, for which you've been redeemed, not

with ... silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ.

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