

Homily – 1st Sunday of Lent A

“Then the devil left him and, behold, angels came and ministered to him”. Beloved, we celebrate the First Sunday of Lent. In the above concluding words of our Gospel passage (Matt 4:1-11), Christ displays this truth of Scripture: “Submit yourselves ...to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). Every Lenten Season affords us the opportunity to reflect on our faith journey vis-à-vis the battle against evil, “against the principalities... of this present darkness, [and] against the spiritual hosts of wickedness....” (Eph 6:2).

Jesus shows us today the importance of our Lenten discipline and exercises. He demonstrates how we can triumph against evil even in our fragile human nature. Anticipating his spiritual warfare, He fasted for forty days and forty nights (Matt 4:2) in fervent prayers, contemplating the word of God. Thus, he was battle ready and triumphed over the devil’s wicked machinations. Our Lenten Season is a spiritual journey, a time of putting our spiritual house in order. We engage in self-evaluation. In the words of Pope Paul VI, we evaluate our “criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life”. Are they in consonance with or “in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation”? Also, we humbly practice self-denial and intense prayer. Indeed, “Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth” (Ps 124:8).

The First Reading (Gn 2:7-9; 3:1-7) shows that all human bragging comes to nothing. We are from “the clay of the ground”, from dust. This underlines our initial “insignificance”; only the breath of God in us made all the difference. Last Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, reminded us of our original inconsequential state: “Man [woman], remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return”. Yes! Imagine how ash or dust particles are easily blown away by the wind: if we dispense with God, we risk being stripped of all glory and returned to the “dust” of eternal damnation. See how much God has given us: He created us, planted a garden for us (the entire created order) with things “delightful to look at and good for food”, endowed us with the knowledge of good and evil to practice freedom within discipline. Unfortunately, we fell to the treachery of the enemy and ruined our relationship with God.

Beloved, “all that glitters is not gold.” The devil only offers false hopes. See how he took advantage of the unhealthy cravings of Adam and Eve, offering them false hopes and false notions of knowledge and freedom: “Did God really tell you not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?” He pushed them to begin to distrust and doubt what God already commanded. Notice that Adam and Eve actually had knowledge of good and evil prior to being tempted. How else could they have responded correctly? “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 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 devil

pretended to be offering them something more, saying, “You certainly will not die! 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 evil.” Regrettably, they ironically trusted the devil more than God. They sought knowledge on the devil’s or human’s terms; not on God’s terms. What a shame! Immediately, their eyes “were opened, and they realized that they were naked”. That is, they realized they had been duped, ridiculed and stripped of their true dignity. They lost their gift of immortality and the blissful life of paradise. They saw the emptiness of their blind pursuits. Surely, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Eccl 1:2).

The devil is always looking for an opening to penetrate and take advantage of our excessive cravings, unrestrained appetites, inordinate ambitions, the exploitation of human of sexuality, the misappropriation of knowledge, and the misuse of power and influence. Beloved, “Give no opportunity to the devil” (Eph 4:27). Many times, we too are confronted by the devil in “human or mental forms”, asking, “Did God really say you must go to church on Sundays or holy days of obligation?” Did God really say you should be pro-life? Did God really say...? Beloved, stand your ground!

The devil, beloved, is no respecter of persons. He even dared to tempt Jesus, attempting to take advantage of His Identity and Personality: “If you are the Son of God....” Also, he tried to exploit His “Lenten” Fast: “Command that these stones become loaves of bread”; and his Position as Heir to all that belongs to the Father: “All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me.” In all, the devil is a liar only trying to distract. The kingdoms of the earth are not the devil’s to grant. The devil did not create anything; he owns nothing. The kingdoms of the earth belong to God who declared: “All the Earth is mine” (Exod 19:5). Christ remained focused; He was hungry by choice. His power and possession were not under any danger. Standing on God’s word, He repelled the enemy on all fronts, saying “It is written: *One does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.*” “It is written: *You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.*” And finally, “Get away, Satan! It is written: *The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve.*”

Finally, our Second Reading (Rom 5:12-19) showed that where Adam and Eve failed, Jesus succeeded. Like Him, we must anchor our lives on the Word of God, in faith, prayer and fasting, in order to prevail against the persistent onslaught of the devil. Never be eager to dispense with sacrifices and the discipline of lent: Participate in fasting, abstinence, and other Lenten exercises, especially the Stations of the Cross. Never bargain with the Devil. Many in the world are already entangled in cultic, superstitious and “pagan” practices which promise them false hopes. As we begin this Season, may God grant us a fruitful Lent through Christ our Lord. Amen.