

First Sunday of Lent, March 13, 2011

Homily by Deacon Brian Cordeiro

It may come as a surprise to some to think of Lent as a joyful season. But the significance of this statement becomes clear when we consider what the liturgical season of Lent is all about. Lent is a time to consider our choices. We may choose to be for God or against God, to live our lives with God or without God. Our decisions have consequences both for our life in this world and in the next.

The Forty Days of Lent are an image of Jesus fasting for 40 days and nights in the desert. That is not the only time the number 40 appears in the Bible. It rained for 40 days and 40 nights while Noah and company were in the ark. Moses spent 40 days and 40 nights with God on Mt Sinai when the Covenant of the Ten Commandments was established. In the *First Book of Kings*, Elijah was pursued by the army of the wicked Queen Jezebel after he killed the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. He fell asleep in the desert but was woken twice by an angel who gave him food and water to drink. Strengthened by that drink he walked 40 days and 40 nights to the mountain of God, Horeb. There in a still small voice, God gave him the instruction for the re-establishment of the faith of Yahweh. In the New Testament, not only did Jesus fast for 40 days and nights, His Ascension into heaven occurred 40 days after the Resurrection. In the Bible 40 represents a time of need, struggle and testing in preparation for a new relationship with God.

I love the life that the first reading brings. God breathes life into man and forms him in to his own image. Life is all about choices. The choices that we make have consequences. In the first reading, God had placed man at the head of His creation in the Garden. The only condition to continuing relationship with the creator God was obedience. When that condition was broken, man finds himself at enmity with God. The sin of Adam had consequences both for Adam and the whole human race, as the second reading points out. But the Good News is that just as bad decisions and disobedience have consequences, so do good decisions and obedience. Jesus comes and with his obedience to the Father, undoes the wrong and wins us back our relationship with God, wins us our salvation.

I am reminded of a story of a loving Christian couple. The wife, like a good wife, cooked good healthy meals for her husband-lots of salad, bran muffins, low salt and fat. Both of them passed on and were met at the pearly gates by St. Peter, who said to them "You have both inherited heaven; I would like to give you a short tour of the place. They enter heaven along with St. Peter and right away they see huge spread of the most sumptuous food laid out before them-steaks, cakes, cookies, ice creams. St. Peter says to them "You can eat as much as you like of all of this all the time and the good news is that you never have to worry about heart attacks, cholesterol, high blood pressure or anything else. The husband turns around to his wife and gently says to her "Honey, was it wise to have eaten all those salads and bran muffins over the years; we could have been here a lot earlier. Sometimes at the beginning of the 40 days of Lent, we feel like that. We want to be at the end and receive the graces of Easter without going through the period of Lent.

The three temptations the Lord withstood are really temptations that confront us all. "Take these stones and turn them into bread," is echoed by us when we make the goal of our lives keeping our stomachs full, or, basically, being selfish. "Man does not live on bread alone," Jesus counters. Our lives are certainly empty when we are self centered. We need God. We need his Word to give us purpose. What will remain of us 100 years from now? Here on earth we will all be gone and probably forgotten. But there is part of us that can remain here on earth. There is part of us that will last. That part of us is the Presence of the Lord that you and I have strived to make real in the world. There is nothing self-centered in living for the Lord.

"Leap from the top of the Temple and force God to save you," the devil tempts Jesus. When we say that our choices in life depend on our own desires, not on what is objectively right or wrong, or, more, when we say that we determine morality ourselves, we act as though we are little gods. Pope Benedict has written about the scourge of relativism, as modern man sacrifices principals to his own selfish desires. We do not have the right to tempt our God.

The final temptation brought before Jesus was the temptation to sacrifice our faith for the sake of power. People in the business world are tempted to make compromises in their Christianity to advance their careers. Even in the homes, people will push Christian charity aside in order to assert their position in the marriage and family. I used to say the Pilgrims Prayer, "Lord Jesus, have mercy on me a sinner."

We spend the 40 days of Lent doing battle. The weapons we use in our war for the Lord are the three main practices of Lent, prayer, fasting and almsgiving. We look for ways to strengthen our union with God, to pray more. Perhaps that means setting a new time aside every day for prayer. We all need to make time to pray more. By fasting we don't just mean giving something up, we mean getting a control over ourselves. That might demand that we avoid those people, places and activities that bring out the worst in us. By almsgiving, we mean charity to the poor in body mind and spirit. When we reach out to the Presence of the Lord in others, we reach away from our selfishness.

The 40 days of Lent are a time of preparation for our role in the Kingdom. They lead to Easter, the celebration of the gift of Life Christ showered on us. During Lent we both prepare for Easter and prepare to devote ourselves to the work of the Kingdom for the remainder of our lives. Along with preparing for Easter we should consider life adjustments to do the work of the Kingdom. For example, a prayer time we establish during Lent or a practice we chose might become a permanent part of our lives. We have the certainty of knowing that Jesus resisted the devil and so can we with the help of the Holy Spirit. Whether we fast or give alms or do any other acts of penitence, the primary objective is to be in better relationship with God. The alms, the fasting and other charitable acts of mercy are means to solidifying our life with God.

Lent is a time when we can take courage because Jesus, one like us overcame Satan. So can we. Let us pray during this season of Lent to make God our top priority. All our actions and decisions need to be motivated by a burning desire to be right with God. The sacrifices we make in Lent are means to reach that end and are not an end in itself. Let us prepare ourselves during these 40 days so that we can receive the new life that is promised to us by the resurrection of Jesus, which we celebrate at Easter.