

Homily: First Sunday in Lent  
(March 13, 2011)

*In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Upon reading the lessons for this first Sunday in Lent, most people quickly pick out the theme of temptation. This is especially evident if you look at the Genesis and Matthew reading together.

There is however, another theme present in these readings just as important as temptation and that is free will. In the Genesis reading of Adam and Eve, their fall from grace comes from a free decision. They choose to give into temptation. In Matthew Jesus – exercising the same mortal free will – chooses not to take Satan’s bait.

This is the key difference between the two stories as identified by St. Paul in his letter to the Romans: Where our first parents failed us by making the wrong choice, the incarnate Son of God was victorious in making the right one.

Where Adam and Eve opted for godlike status, Jesus, who is God-with-us, chose the way of self-denial and self-emptying. He reveals himself to be one for whom equality with God was not something to be desired. Instead he took the form of a slave and was born into the way of humanity, with all that it entails.

In eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve saw an opportunity to rise above their creaturely status and position themselves upon the same plateau as their Creator. Think about it. Think of the power that knowledge would give a person. With it, one could rule the other creatures around them and thus rule the world. One might even rival God himself, making God obsolete.

And that's the problem. Whether we admit it or not we need God for God is life and without God humanity cannot exist. Hence, when Adam and Eve chose to disobey the Almighty; when they chose to replace him with an image of themselves they took a step away from his presence. It was like stepping backwards into the shadows surrounding a campfire – suddenly the heat is lessened and the world becomes colder and darker. Humanity stepped outside of Paradise before God cast us out.

St. Theophilus of Antioch put it succinctly when he said, “So also for the first man, disobedience procured his expulsion from Paradise. Not, therefore, as if there were any evil in the tree of knowledge; but from disobedience did humanity draw, as from a fountain labour, pain, grief, and at last fall prey to death.”

I often imagine that upon biting the apple, when Adam and Eve's eyes were opened to the knowledge of good and evil it meant also a devastating awareness of the consequences of their actions, of how exposed their disobedience lay before God.

I wonder if this awareness was the motivation for history's first clothing line, *Armani Fig*. It wasn't just that they stood physically naked before the Holy One, but spiritually naked as well – their souls and the evil that now tainted them lay bare before God and each other, making them feel vulnerable. So clothing then - as it does now (along with other worldly possessions) – served as a tangible distraction from the sickness of sin that had tainted the interior life of humanity.

Yet it is in to this sickness and sin that the Son of God chose to enter. It is our mortal nature, both flesh and will that Christ took on and by doing so represented all of

humanity at the second crucial temptation in the wilderness, just as Adam and Eve represented all of humanity in the first.

In the desert Our Lord faced that same crafty serpent, who attempted to lure him away from the will of the Father with the very same enticements he had used on Adam and Eve. Though the three offers to Christ were power, honour and glory it all boils down to an effort to get Jesus to toss aside his oneness with the Father for selfish attention to created things.

Of course this doesn't make sense since Jesus already had these things in his divine nature. So it must mean that the Devil then is appealing to Jesus' humanity. He is playing up the worldly perspective – reframing power, honour and glory in mortal terms and then offering to satisfy the human yearning for tangibility and results.

But Jesus doesn't give in. He chooses instead the path most of us fear, the path of obedience and humility, of *worldly* shame and disgrace and ultimately death. This choice in the wilderness is what reveals Christ to be the New Adam. He is the human who when faced with the same primordial temptation, unlike the first chose to fully embrace what it means to be a creature.

Ultimately, this is why the death of Jesus has brought about eternal life. His choice, his humility has satisfied the righteousness of God restoring creation to our primordial relationship with the Father. In turn the gates of Eden have once again been opened to us.

In his body, put forth willingly, Christ has reversed Adam's disobedience and restored the image of God in humanity. Thus St. Paul can rightfully say, "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 were made righteous."

Or as St. Ambrose of Milan said three hundred years later, "For Christ, had he willed, need not have died, but He neither thought that death should be shunned as though there were any cowardice in it, nor could He have saved us better than by dying. And so His death is the life of all."

"His death is the life of all." We would do well to remember this especially in Lent. It seems to me that many of us approach Lent fatalistically: though we participate in the disciplines deep down we believe that we are hell-bound no matter what we do. The fancy term for this view comes from Calvinism and is called *Double Predestination*. It is the idea that God foreordains before all time who will be saved and who will roast in the abyss.

But Anglicans are not Calvinists. We believe that we have a part to play in our judgment. That our response of faith in baptism leads to our justification and opens us up to us the sacramental life of the Church which, along with our works of righteousness contribute to our growth in holiness – our growth into the likeness of Christ who has saved us.

At the other extreme many of us operate out of the understanding that tells us the harder we try the more likely we are to be saved, that if we perform the correct rituals the right way and enough times, we can buy back paradise.

These paradigms are precisely where Satan wants us. He wants us to believe one, that it is all about us and two that we are lost and he alone has the answer. This was the trap Adam and Eve fell into.

But the whole point of the Lenten disciplines is not to show us how doomed we are, neither cause us to flagellate ourselves beyond recognition. It is about disciplining the heart, mind and soul to more fully live into the life that has already been won; as ones who have already received the eternal gift poured out from the Cross.

We aren't out to appease God by our severity and thus gain the prize. We are called to fasting, almsgiving, meditation on the Scriptures, prayer, and so forth because these are avenues of salvation granted to members of the Kingdom.

Lent is not an opportunity for redemption; it is the result of it.