

February 21, 2010

First Sunday of Lent

First Reading: Deuteronomy 26:4-10

Second Reading: Romans 10:8-13

Gospel Reading: Luke 4:1-13

Homilist: Father Joe Pemberton

In 1996 I had the wonderful privilege of journeying to the Holy Land. I spent 10 wonderful days there and one of the places they (tour guides) took us was where Jesus went into the desert for 40 days where He was tempted by the devil. The area where Jesus went to experience this is more rocky than it is desert. It's very difficult to move around. There is absolutely no life there. It is totally barren and as I was there I was thinking in my mind how difficult it must have been for Jesus to endure this barren wasteland for 40 days, the number the scripture gives us. I couldn't take it for more than 5 minutes. I just wanted out of there. It's just not a pleasant place to be.

It's interesting to note that the number '40' is used in scripture. It's one of those biblical numbers that simply means a 'long period of time'. We don't know exactly how long Jesus was in the desert but the number '40' designates He was there for a long period of time.

In the book of Exodus we read of the Israelites as they come out of the land of Egypt and begin their

journey to the Promised Land. Scripture tells us that their journey lasts 40 years. Well, we don't know exactly how long that journey was but that number '40' tells us, in that number, that it was a long period of time as they made their journey. You find these, what they call biblical numbers, in the old and new testaments which are always symbolic. So, Jesus is in the desert for 40 days.

This morning I would like to take the three major actions of the Lenten season. Those of you who came to my Masses on Ash Wednesday will remember I spoke about them: prayer, fasting and almsgiving. And I would like to connect them to Jesus himself and the experience that He has in the desert.

The first and foremost reason why Jesus went into the desert was that He wanted to enter into an experience of prayer with His Father. This event takes place right after the baptism of Jesus. He's about to embark on His public ministry. His life is now changing dramatically and in His humanity of flesh and blood Jesus is beginning, shall we say, to

tremble with fear and trepidation of what now awaits Him because He already knows His journey is going to take Him to the cross. He already knows this. He's filled with that wisdom pulling from God into himself. So in the midst of this, shall we say, His broken humanity, in His fear and anguish He comes into the desert to place himself before the Father, to allow the Father to speak to Him, to penetrate Him with the Spirit, and it was in the desert Jesus, of course, speaks with the Father. You know, prayer is conversation with God. It's us speaking with God and God speaking with us. And Jesus is now in the desert begging the Father; commune with me, Father. Speak to me because I am a fearful man.

The second action of Lent that we find in Jesus himself is fasting. Fasting! The gospel today from Luke says "At the end of forty days he was hungry." He did not eat the whole time He's in the desert. He is fasting. What is the significance of fasting in the Lenten season? What was the significance of fasting for Jesus? Fasting is a way of saying "no" to the world and "yes" to God. That's the heart of fasting; saying no to the world and yes to God. Jesus, in His fasting in the desert, is saying no to the world around Him. He says no to the temptations of the world as the devil is now beginning to confront Him. He says no to this and says yes to God as He refuses to eat at

His fasting. No to the world, yes to God.

You know fasting is a very important part of Lent for us. We grow up as children being taught that we need to give up something for Lent. Well, there's a lot of symbolism in that. There really is. There's a lot of discipline in the spiritual life. You know, I love sweets. I absolutely crave sweets so I give up sweets for Lent. That's a big thing for me. Well, yesterday Father Balaji and I go to the Furr's cafeteria for lunch and we're passing through and there staring at me is a fresh piece of banana cream pie. It's looking right at me and has my name on it and says "take me, I'm waiting for you." But I say no and then Father Balaji has the gall to reach in and take a piece of pecan pie and puts it on his tray. I said "What are you doing?" He says "I didn't give up sweets for Lent." And he didn't. You know how hard it is to sit at a table and watch someone eat a piece of pecan pie when you have given that up for Lent? I said, Lord, help me. It's tough. It's tough. There's a lot of grace that flows out of fasting. So Jesus in the desert is saying no. I'm saying no to what the world offers me and saying yes to what my Father wants to give me.

The third aspect is almsgiving. What is almsgiving all about? Almsgiving is simply focusing on the needs of others. It's becoming empty so others may have life. At the

heart of almsgiving is that we become empty so others may have life. We focus on the needs of others especially the poor and the suffering of our world. For Jesus the action of almsgiving is this: He becomes empty so humanity may be given life. Jesus empties himself so humanity may be given the life and grace of God, that the Father may penetrate the heart of every human being and draw them into the grace of salvation.

All of this is found within Jesus in the desert: prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Thus, we take that from Jesus himself and hopefully bring it into our own life as we journey through the season of Lent: a time to immerse ourselves into the power of prayer, a time to say, through fasting, no to the world and yes to God, a time to become empty so others may have life. All of that is found in those actions.

Lent is very much a time of conversion. It's a time of change of heart, metanoia, the Greek word that St. Paul is known to speak of.

For the next three nights, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday evenings we're going to have a parish mission here. I was not able to find a priest to do it so I'm going to lead the mission this year. I've never done this before so I have a little fear and trepidation about how this is going to go. We're gonna take the

three gospels. Monday night will be the Samaritan woman at the well. Tuesday is the healing of the blind man and Wednesday night is the raising of Lazarus from the dead. They are the three major gospels of the Lenten season. I'm gonna take those and hopefully break them open for you. The focal point of the three evenings is our call to conversion because the focal point of those gospels is our call to conversion.

Jesus himself went through, shall we say, a conversion in the desert in the sense that He was going through a change. He had been in Nazareth for thirty years, he'd been living at home; a rather comfortable life there with Mary and Joseph and His friends in the neighborhood and suddenly now He's out in the desert embarking on His mission. His life is being changed; it's being turned upside down. There is, the Father saying to Jesus, a call to conversion in the sense that I need to recreate your heart, I need to give you the stamina, I need to give you the grace to be faithful to what I called you to do. And we need the same thing. We need the same thing.

So I invite you to join with me the next three evenings for our mission here at Holy Family that it may be a time of conversion, a time of change for all of us as we draw more deeply into the loving God who has given us the gift of His Son whose

death and resurrection has brought

each of us everlasting life.