

Lent 1
13/03/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 2:15 – 17, 3:1 - 7

Psalm 32

Romans 5:12 - 19

Matthew 4:1 - 11

Lent: time to renew our obedience

The forty-day fast of Lent may seem like a period of “bad news” before we reach the “good news” of Easter. But Ash Wednesday, Lent and Easter are not separate events. They are an integrated set of liturgies set against the wide horizon of God’s gracious, redeeming love expressed towards us in Jesus Christ. That means they begin and end in grace. Even though during this season we take the opportunity to reflect on our mortality and the power of sin in our lives, we also focus on the creative and re-creative power of God by which we are saved.

The forty days of Lent symbolically parallels Christ’s withdrawal into the Wilderness which itself remembers Israel’s forty years of wandering in the Wilderness. Both experiences involved tests of obedience, which is why the now unpopular subject of sin is associated with Lent. The penitential focus of this season is intended help us reflect on and make decisions about the things that to a greater or lesser extent enslave us. But we don’t do this with the aim of burdening ourselves with self-condemnation. Rather, it is to enable us to take a grip on life because these realities stand condemned by the love and power God expressed in Christ, which makes the renewal of our obedience possible.

We know that Lent itself becomes trivialised and twisted, especially around the sense of “giving something up for Lent”. The original practice of fasting included the idea that the food forgone would be given to the poor, which meant the season was a time of deliberately practicing love for the neighbour, rather than counting up our moral lapses. In the language of the Medieval Church, the struggle was between a life of virtue or a life of vice. Vice stood for doing that which is contrary to the will of God. Virtue involved making a habit of co-operating with grace, in order to live in the likeness of Christ. We no longer think like this, but in a world where the values of celebrity and self-interest are rampant, there is profit in renewing the idea of a virtuous life.

An aspect of Lent that we are probably less aware of is the way the themes of the readings during these Sundays anticipate the drama of salvation that is re-enacted in the liturgy of the Easter Vigil, which is like a compendium of salvation history. That is why exerting ourselves during Lent, giving time to the themes of Sundays, being part of the Lenten bible studies, making time for our own reflection, as well as acts of love and justice, will mean we arrive at Easter having already “practised and prayed” the journey, with Christ in word and deed.

On the first Sunday of Lent we always encounter the cosmic themes of Creation and recreation. These are represented in Paul's thinking through the contrasting figures of Adam, who brought brokenness to life through asserting himself against God, and Christ who chose obedience to God over all else. Paul's letter to the Romans comes to us as scripture, but it is a letter in which he states his theology of mission: the basis for the inclusion of the Gentiles in God's plan of salvation for the world. The section from which our reading is taken, is part of a long reflection (Chapters 7 – 12) on the human situation in which all people find themselves as a result of the Fall, and of God's work for us in response, in Jesus Christ. In the course of this reflection Paul works on a textual landscape populated by the biblical figures of Abraham, Adam and Christ each of whom become typologies for different ways of life. A reference to a figure like Adam or Christ is like a quote that references a much larger story that we are meant to understand.

The argument in Chapter 5 centres on the two figures of Adam and Christ, each of which is a prototype whose actions defined the aeon that followed them. Paul is referring to Adam when he says: *...just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, so death spread to all...* At a practical level we know, often to our sorrow, how the quality and commitments of a leader affect the people under them: the character of their political leaders affects citizens, and workers take on the character of their CEO. But there is more here: the actions of Adam had a universal effect on all people. This is not genetic, even though St Augustine said so. Adam was a type, created and gifted in the grace of God, who, given the choice of obedience to God or not, chose to assert himself against God. The perspective of our foundational story is that this choice spread from the one to the many. It led all humanity to become ensnared in powers hostile to God. This is the doctrine of Original Sin, which simply put means that from the beginning, humanity preferred its own way of life, and the consequences of that decision touched us all. Sin does manifest itself in particular moral lapses, but fundamentally what we mean by sin is life lived in hostility or apathy towards God. Confession means being willing to turn away from that position to turn towards God.

Christ is also a representative figure, whose life and work has universal implications. He did not assert himself against God, but chose to remain obedient even to the point of death. Because he lived for God completely God raised him up to show he had introduced the reign of life into the world. That is what it means when we say that Christ by death conquered death. In him an avenue of grace opened up for all that leads us away from ensnarement in fear and despair toward life with God that is full and free.

Paul then goes on to say that the free gift given to us in Christ is not like the error of Adam, because divine justice does not operate like human justice. The cumulative force of the trespasses committed by Adam's successors met with an unexpectedly gracious response. In spite of everything God continued to nourish, protect and search for Adam's successors, and finally offered them the gift of reconciliation, in the life of one of them. And this was for all, not just some, which is why Paul became an apostle to the Gentiles.

The story of the temptations of Jesus is really a picture of the cosmic battle between life and death, good and evil, fought out on our territory and won for us by one of us. The angels ministered to Jesus in the desert, but it is not yet finished. In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus again confronted the question of God's will and his own will. Unlike Adam in Eden, he stayed true to God. In another garden the resurrected Christ appeared to reveal that in his life and death a cosmic re-ordering had taken place that was more powerful than the disordering that took place for all under Adam. It also affects us all. In some liturgies, where we say: *Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again* the words: "*dying he destroyed our death, rising he restored our life. Lord Jesus come in glory*" are used to affirm that in Christ grace abounds. What is given to us in Christ is stronger than what was transmitted to us by Adam and we can all live without fear. This is good news and on the first Sunday of Lent, as every Sunday it salutary to be reminded that there is a temptation, which is to believe in our fallenness as if it were stronger than our redemption. On the first Sunday of Lent I hope none of you have given up chocolate unless you need to do so. I hope your choices for making this a good and holy lent are much deeper than that, and will lead to the joyful renewal of your obedience, to the glory of God.
