

Fully Redeemed

On Ash Wednesday this past week I remarked that I always have difficulty with the Litany of Penitence we did that day, as well as the Great Litany we did this morning. This morning's Litany is certainly long, and the language can seem archaic. The old language reminds me that the Great Litany was the first service translated from Latin into English, even before the Mass itself. What bothers me is not the language, however. Rather, the litanies remind me of how many ways one can sin against God. I'm aware enough of my own sins as it is. I don't like having them all laid out. Sometimes I catch myself thinking at least I've avoided that one!

The long list of sins boils down to a few basic types: we try to make ourselves God, or we try to test God, or we worship something else besides God. Those three basic temptations are the ones Jesus experienced in the wilderness. If he hadn't, he wouldn't have shared the same life that we do. Then we would really be lost. That may be why Matthew, Mark, and Luke all include the temptation of Christ.

The timing of Jesus' temptation is ironic. He has just had the experience of being baptized by his cousin John, feeling the Holy Spirit come down upon him and hearing the wonderful affirmation that he is God's Beloved Son. Yet as soon as it's over that same Spirit leads him into the wilderness. Mark actually says the Spirit *drove* Jesus into the wilderness. There's a lesson for us. When you think things are going well, watch out!

Mark leaves out the details of the temptation. Matthew and Luke include them, each in a slightly different order. They emphasize that Jesus was in a very vulnerable state. He had fasted for forty days and nights, and he was famished. So the first thing the devil says – or Satan or evil personified, however you want to think of it – Satan says “turn these stones into bread.” In other words, act like God since you seem to think that you are. Jesus counters by quoting scripture, that food isn't everything. God's word is more life-giving than food. Then Satan quotes scripture himself, to his own purpose, enticing Jesus to tempt God by throwing himself off the top of the temple. Jesus will have none of that, either. Finally, the devil shows him all the wealth of the world and offers it to him if he will only worship something other than God – evil, in this case. Now out of patience, Jesus says “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” Defeated for the moment (Luke says “until an opportune time”), Satan leaves. Jesus has turned aside every temptation presented to him.

Perhaps for you all of this makes Jesus seem different from us, maybe even something other than human. My take on it is that in resisting evil, Jesus shows us how to be *fully* human. After all, humanity was not created evil. Like all creation, humans were created good. In Genesis we're told that God looked at all of creation, and behold, it was *very* good. As an aside I'll say once again that I do not read the creation stories as historical fact, and certainly not as science. Rather, they tell us fundamental truths about our relationship with God and one another. In this morning's case, we heard that humans are all too ready to listen to a lying voice rather than do what God desires. What's amusing is that the serpent tempts the woman with knowledge of good and evil, but that's the last reason she decides to take a bite. More importantly, the fruit looks tasty! It's just like that first temptation of Jesus, to create food when he was hungry. No wonder fasting is such an important Christian discipline.

Also this morning St. Paul explained how we are released from all our sins through Jesus Christ. Paul's argument is rather convoluted, using a rhetorical device called typology. He contrasts two types, one represented by Adam and the other by Jesus Christ, going back and forth between them. It's helpful to remember that in the Hebrew of Genesis, "Adam" simply means "human being." Hebrew has a different word for "male human being." So when Paul talks about Adam he means not only the Biblical character but by extension all humanity. To simplify the rhetoric, Paul says that Adam's humanity, through sin, brings death and condemnation. Jesus Christ, through the free gift of grace, brings life and makes us right before God. Righteousness and justification are technical terms for being right with God.

Over the next four Sundays of Lent we'll hear more about all of this. Next Sunday we will look more closely at how we are made right with God and see that the Law – rules for living – is not sufficient for salvation. It's more important to act in faith when God calls us. On the following Sundays we'll hear how God comes to us through Jesus Christ as living water, as light, as Spirit, and as life.

That's why I have hope even after hearing so much about the many ways I have failed God in thought, word, and deed, in things done and left undone. I have hope because I know that all of those failures have been redeemed. All of those sins have been washed away by living water. Frankly, I used to think of Lent as a real downer, and starting with the Great Litany set the mood for the coming weeks. But over time I have come to believe that the light of Christ really *has* overcome the darkness. Yes, we can always do better, and Lent is a good time to be more disciplined in the ways that we seek and follow Christ. But we do that for the love of God, not because of shame at our sins. We *have* been saved from our sins. We *have* been forgiven. No one can take that away from any one of us. Thanks be to God for that grace given to us through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

[Lent 1: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11.]