

THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT - A

On the first Sunday of Lent the Church puts before us the temptations of Jesus and in this Year A we read Matthew's account. They remind us that in his human nature Jesus was like us, he had to face temptation and is tempted three times to put God in second place by seeking nourishment apart from God; testing God for the sake of self indulgence; denying God to follow false gods who serve the powers of this world; but Jesus, led by the Spirit, is able to overcome the wiles of the devil. In the first reading from Genesis we hear that man and woman are God's creation and how they are tempted and disobey God's command and in doing so lose their innocence, a contrast with the gospel reading. In the second reading Paul contrasts Adam and Christ, death came to all mankind as a result of Adam's sin but 'the good act of one man (Jesus) brings everyone life.'

The **First Reading** is from the book of Genesis the first book in the Bible and the first book of the Pentateuch, the five books of the Jewish Law. The book's origins are still uncertain, it speaks of mankind's beginnings and then the history of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob until their arrival in Egypt. The book is a composite of three documents the Yahwist, (J), the Elohist, (E) and the Priestly, (P) that go to make up the book of Genesis whose authorship, although attributed to Moses, is unknown. The Yahwistic tradition has a lively and vivid style and although God is described in human terms the author has a deep sense of the divine. The Elohist tradition is more sober in style with an exacting moral code and an insistence on the distance separating human beings from God. The Priestly tradition contributes laws and is particularly concerned with the organisation of the sanctuary, with sacrifices and festivals and with the person of Aaron, the priest and his descendants. This is the tradition of the priests of the Temple of Jerusalem. The Yahwist and the Elohist were possibly committed to writing on the reign of Solomon c.950 whereas the Priestly was not codified until the Exile 587-538 and added to the Pentateuch after the return from the Exile.

The reading, 2.7-9, 3.1-7, is clearly in two parts. Lent begins with Ash Wednesday when with ashes placed on our foreheads we are reminded that we are formed from the dust of the earth and so begins the first part of our reading today from an account of the creation of man, created by God we are his creatures and according to the story God placed man in the garden he had fashioned for him to care for the garden. Man has everything he needs and God while being his master is also his friend. We do not hear about man's loneliness and the creation of woman which completes the creation story with the appearance of the first human couple, both man and woman are equally responsible for the garden. The second part of the reading follows and describes the Fall of man from God's friendship. The serpent is a disguise for a being hostile to God and like Balaam's donkey has the power of speech. The woman who is tempted first, knows God and the command he has given with regard to the tree in the middle of the garden. Both husband and wife know what they are doing is wrong and when their eyes are opened they have too much knowledge and what up till the present has been good is now seen as evil, represented by the knowledge of their nakedness the arousal of lust, the first manifestation of disorder introduced into the harmony of creation. Adam and Eve hide themselves in the garden from God, they don't see him as friend any more, man is at the nadir of his relationship with God.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 50.1-4a,10-12,15, is the Miserere, a penitential psalm, a prayer of contrition. Aware of our guilt before God we seek his mercy. In the third verse we have God creating the justification of the sinner the most wonderful of all the works of God, analogous to his work of creation, it is his justification which enables the sinner to open his lips and his mouth declares God's praise for his renewed creation.

The **Second Reading** is from Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome. Paul had not founded the Church in Rome but he intended to visit the Christians there on his way to Spain. This huge letter, with much detailed teaching, written in the winter of 57/58, is difficult to summarise. The community in Rome was a mixture of Jewish and non-Jewish converts and there was a danger that they would look down on each other. Some of the converts from Judaism wanted pagan converts to be circumcised to ensure their salvation. Paul maintained this made nonsense of Christ's redemptive work. The Law was good and holy but made those who kept the Law aware of their need of God's help. This help has now been given in Christ Jesus which is explained in some detail.

In the reading, 5.12-19 Paul, having already spoken about Abraham's faith justifying him, not the observance of the Law since the Law did not exist in Abraham's day, explains to the Roman Christians the role of Adam in bringing sin and death into the world. Sin which lives in humanity divides us from God. Death, the reward of sin, came into the world as a result of Adam's disobedience and the death Paul is speaking of is spiritual and eternal, physical death is its symbol. If Adam's one act of disobedience brought death then Jesus' obedience, by his glorious death and resurrection, restored us to life with God the Father which is achieved through Baptism (see Chapter 6). If you have time read the whole chapter 5 and the beginning of chapter 6.