

1st Sunday of Lent (A)  
(Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7 / Matthew 4:1-11)  
05.03.2017

We often blame the circumstances of our lives for the ills that befall us. When things go wrong we are inclined to attribute the problem encountered to the environment in which we find ourselves. How readily we reason along the following lines: *If only ... If only, I had enjoyed a better start in life... If only I had been graced to have had more attentive, more understanding parents... If only I had been given greater educational opportunities etc.* Or again, when we mess up, we attempt to justify ourselves by saying things such as this: *If only she hadn't have lured me... If only he hadn't have initiated me into the wrong way... It was other people who said this was the right thing to do; I only followed their advice etc.* In a nutshell, when things go awry in our lives, we are likely to claim that it is somebody else's fault – indeed, anybody/everybody else's fault. We don't like to own up to our personal responsibilities.

I can still hear my little nephew say to his parents when he and his younger brother would get up to childish mischief and be caught out: *I'm a good boy, you know.* He never said that his little brother was bad, but when things went wrong, by the interjection of that little statement *I'm a good boy, you know,* he kind of implied that it was the other little chap who was the real trouble-maker. He implied that it was his younger brother who had caused whatever went wrong to happen. (Those little nephews are now a fully grown young men who are devoted fathers of their own young families, who smile at their own children playing out in some of the same ways they once did – one passing the buck to the other being, lumbering the other with the blame.)

I suspect we have all reasoned as my nephew used to do. At one time or other most of us will have probably let ourselves *off the hook* by hanging the blame on another/on others for something we have done wrong.

I am not denying that our life circumstances do come into play; the environment in which we live can influence matters in our lives. But, I am equally convinced that even with an ideal background and a quasi-perfect environment we can still go *off the rails*; we can still manage to get things wrong and even mess up big time.

It seems to me that this is what today's first reading flags up for us.

The text from the Book of Genesis we read this morning shows us how God provided our first parents, Adam and Eve, with a perfect environment. This first pair to go *off the rails* in life did not find themselves inheritors of a mess; they created a mess for themselves.

While we often blame other people around us and/or the outward environment in which we find ourselves for our difficulties in life, it is important to note that in spite of their ideal surroundings Adam and Eve stumbled and fell – they failed, they got things wrong.

This demonstrates for us, does it not, that while the environment in which we find ourselves can add to our problems, it is never entirely at fault.

The point I am making – the point I feel it is important for us to grasp – is that we need to take responsibility for all our actions, including our mistakes and failures.

The psalmist does this over and over again; he owns up to his faults when he prays along these lines: *Lord, I have sinned... I have stumbled and fallen ... I have failed You...* The psalmist dares to say: *My sin is always before me... My wounds are foul and festering, the result of my own folly...*

The psalmist doesn't justify his faults or rationalise his wrong-doing; he simply admits to having gotten it wrong.

What happens to make things go wrong? How is it that we mess up?

The Adam and Eve story is really revealing here.

The account we read this morning outlines for us the process of temptation and how human weakness succumbs to it.

The serpent offered something that had been forbidden by God. The tempter presented what was forbidden as a very attractive option. The *Prince of Deceit* managed to subtly infiltrate the thought process and disturb the minds and hearts of both Adam and Eve. He did this by introducing doubt and suspicion into the equation. Adam and Eve were led to doubt God and the truth of His word. By the same token, they were led to question their own understanding of things. When Eve took on board the serpent's question, she was left bewildered. She asked herself: *Did God really say?* She wondered about God's reasons and concluded that there must be something sinister behind the Lord's command. During her debate with the serpent, Eve is shown to have offered some half-hearted opposition, but her growing doubt in God weakened her resolve. In the end, she gave in.

Notice how Eve quickly succumbed to Satan's temptation.

Eve succumbed when her thinking became muddled, when she was no longer clear about the details of God's command. God had told her not to *eat* from a certain tree (Cf. Gen 2:17), but, in her conversation with the serpent, Eve claimed God had said they were not even to *touch* the tree (Cf. Gen 3:3). Eve made God's requirements more difficult than they were. Her confusion about what God had said made her even more susceptible to give into the serpent's wiles.

There is a warning for us here. We must be careful about making up rules and regulations which go beyond what God actually asks of us. This has been a great temptation for God's People from the beginning. How often man-made ordinances have gone far beyond the requirements of God's Law! It happens in Church circles today. The more petty rules and regulations we put in place, the less likely we are to be able to live up to them. When we go beyond what the Lord asks of us we are more likely to fail in regard to what is essential.

Does what we have outlined not sound so familiar? Do we not find ourselves playing out this same sort of scenario time and again? We resist the tempter's wiles up to a certain point, but then we capitulate, we give in. Satan was strengthened in his tempting power by his weakening of Eve's faith in God.

This is where Eve fell. She fell when she allowed doubt and suspicion of God to take possession of her heart and destabilise her. Here too there is a warning for us. We are alerted to the fact that we must stay close to God and maintain our trust in Him. It is by remaining close to the Lord, strong in faith, that we weaken the power of temptation in our lives.

Today's gospel comes in with further insight around temptation.

What we see in this gospel text is how Satan did not entirely discredit that Jesus was the Son of God. What Satan tried to do was to get Jesus to renounce His humanity: the humanity God had chosen to take upon Himself in the man Jesus.

It is interesting to note that in his dealings with the man Jesus, Satan seemed to appeal to real needs and possible doubts that were and still are common to all humanity.

Like all of us, like every human being, the man Jesus needed food, longed for security, sought after protection. It is understandable that He would have appreciated recognition and enjoyed having a certain significance to His life – what we might call a legitimate sense of achievement.

Had Jesus faltered in His humanity, Satan would have called into question His right to rule and His perfection as the unique *God-man*.

Satan and his forces will usually attack us at our most vulnerable points. Our weak points will vary, of course. For some of us the weak point in our life will be around one thing, for another their weak point will be around something else.

The French bring our basic flaws to three categories: *avoir, savoir et pouvoir* – having, knowing and power: thinking oneself to have the right to possess everything, to be all-knowing and in a position to dominate.

Many others would say that for most people the big issues in life – their great temptations – are around power, sex and money. The News regularly flags up for us how people's downfall frequently comes about in and around these domains.

Common to everything that goes wrong in our lives will be a degree of confusion – a lack of clarity, a failure to distinguish things properly.

When this is how things are – when they are greatly confused – then we are thrown back into that state of chaos which reigned before God's creative work began.

You will remember how before God spoke and ordered creation all was in a state of confusion, a state of chaos.

Bearing this in mind, we should pray for the grace to hold in our hearts attitudes that will sustain us and refrain us from falling back into that state of chaos and confusion into which Satan tries to lure us in the bid to ensnare us.

Common to things going wrong in our lives will be a degree of confusion, a lack of clarity, a failure to make evident distinctions. When confusion engulfs us chaos is given a freehand over us.

We need God's grace to stay clear in our thoughts and in the words we speak – as Jesus did. We need to be upright of heart, following the Master's example. We should pray to be able to remain firmly situated – as Christ always was. We must strive to do God's will as it is revealed to us. We must be vigilant not to fall into the snares laid for us by the *diabolos* – literally *the one who divides* our hearts within us.

One of the big temptations for all of us will be that which Satan proposed to Jesus: the temptation to take short-cuts to happiness and/or what might be deemed success.

The road to true life often takes us through rough places, painful passages. It often makes us traverse ways we would rather have avoided. Jesus is clear on this in the gospels in many places.

Some of us may have gone off track through the tempter's wiles. We may have been lured away from the right path by false hopes of easier ways to a good life.

It is consoling for us to see how Jesus was faced with the same temptations that we are.

Christ, the One destined to become King of all the earth, learned that He had to follow the way God the Father indicated to Him: the way of humble obedience, in a life of integrity.

If Jesus had given into the easy ways Satan proposed He would have fallen and everything He had for mission to accomplish would have been pulled down with Him.

Jesus resisted the temptations proposed to Him, drawing strength from the shield of God's word.

When short-cut proposals come our way, we also need to look at them with that critical eye with which Jesus looked at them. Like Christ, we have to discern everything properly, in the light of God's word – being careful around Satan's wiles which have him pervert what our Living God would have us hear through the inspired words of Scripture.

We need to exercise correct discernment around offers that are just too good to be true.

Those who are wise will know that there are no *easy fixes* in life.

The way of redemption is a way of patient endurance. Jesus knew this. He taught us this. He told us to resist the devil and He showed us how to do this, in the assurance that, if only we dare to stand up to the evil one, then Satan will flee from us.

Mind you, we need more than resistance tactics. Resistance alone is not sufficient. We must also positively submit to God.

I leave the last word this Sunday to a couple of lines from the Epistle of James. (We read chapter 4 of James at our morning and evening Offices at the monastery today.)

James prefaces his encouragement to resist the devil, with the assurance that he will flee for us, by saying that what we need to do first is to submit to God in obedience. He writes:

*Submit yourselves entirely to God in obedience. When you do this then you will find that the evil one will flee from you.*

This is what the story of the Temptation of Jesus in the wilderness reveals to us, is it not?

Amen!