

FIRST READING: Deuteronomy 26:4-10

A reading from the Book of Deuteronomy:

Moses spoke to the people, saying: "The priest shall receive the basket from you and shall set it in front of the altar of the LORD, your God. Then you shall declare before the Lord, your God, 'My father was a wandering Aramean who went down to Egypt with a small household and lived there as an alien. But there he became a nation great, strong, and numerous. When the Egyptians maltreated and oppressed us, imposing hard labor upon us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and he heard our cry and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. He brought us out of Egypt with his strong hand and outstretched arm, with terrifying power, with signs and wonders; and bringing us into this country, he gave us this land flowing with milk and honey. Therefore, I have now brought you the firstfruits of the products of the soil which you, O LORD, have given me.' And having set them before the Lord, your God, you shall bow down in his presence.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 91:1-2, 10-11, 12-13, 14-15.

Be with me, Lord, when I am in trouble.

You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, say to the LORD, "My refuge and fortress, my God in whom I trust."

Be with me, Lord, when I am in trouble.

No evil shall befall you, nor shall affliction come near your tent, For to his angels he has given command about you, that they guard you in all your ways.

Be with me, Lord, when I am in trouble.

Upon their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone. You shall tread upon the asp and the viper; you shall trample down the lion and the dragon.

Be with me, Lord, when I am in trouble.

Because he clings to me, I will deliver him; I will set him on high because he acknowledges my name. He shall call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in distress; I will deliver him and glorify him.

Be with me, Lord, when I am in trouble.

SECOND READING: Romans 10:8-13

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans:

Brothers and sisters: What does Scripture say? The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that is, the word of faith that we preach, for, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. For the Scripture says, No one who believes in him will be put to shame. For there is no

distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, enriching all who call upon him. For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: Luke 4:1-13

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke:

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert for forty days, to be tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and when they were over he was hungry. The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, One does not live on bread alone.” Then he took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a single instant. The devil said to him, “I shall give to you all this power and glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I may give it to whomever I wish. All this will be yours, if you worship me.” Jesus said to him in reply, “It is written: You shall worship the Lord, your God, and him alone shall you serve.” Then he led him to Jerusalem, made him stand on the parapet of the temple, and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written: He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you, and: With their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone.” Jesus said to him in reply, “It also says, You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.” When the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him for a time.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 1st Sunday of Lent C

There are two elements of this first reading; the offering and the prayer. There is a context to this passage too. It is a description of ritual, liturgy and communal feast. Our mass has deep roots in this ancient Hebrew story. God’s people are about to enter the Promised Land as people whom God has freed from slavery. The underlying reason for the liturgy is God’s mercy, providence and interaction for and with God’s people. As a result, they give grateful thanks to God. They offer the first fruits of their fields as if they have just entered into Canaan. The purpose of the liturgy is to remember as if they were the ones who personally received God’s gifts. They celebrate the event. To celebrate means to remember the past as the present.

The feast of the first harvest is called Shavuot, which means weeks in English. This feast occurs in early spring and is also called Pentecost in Greek. Pentecost means fifty. The feast begins fifty days after Passover. The Hebrew liturgical calendar is lunar, based upon the cycles of the moon. We have a solar calendar based upon the earth’s orbit of the sun. The lunar cycle is twenty eight days and is inconsistent with the solar cycle. This is why the dates of both Passover and Easter move around in early spring.

What does God want with food? God doesn’t eat; people do. That’s the point. People gathered together for this feast. The abundance of food collected by the priests fed the gathered crowds or congregation. We have lost this sense of community. We gather for mass, celebrate our

liturgy, receive communion and then go home. Our time together may be over an hour. The liturgical celebration, described in Deuteronomy, lasted for eight days and centered around communal feasting. In this context people were grateful to God who ultimately provided the food that people offered. We are grateful to God when the priest says a fast mass and may make sense when he preaches.

The most important element was the profession of gratitude, faith and commitment in the prayer people prayed. In it they remember who they were and what God had done. They offered the first fruits to be shared in feasting in this context. Their love for each other was their witness of their love for God and God's love for them. This passage parallels our Eucharist. God has gifted us with life, faith, family, community and salvation out of God's love for us. Eucharist is Koine Greek for filled with God's gifts; eu means filled with and charis means gift. For this we give grateful thanks. The prayer also professed faith in God. This is the Jewish equivalent of our Apostle's and Nicene Creeds. The prayer expresses both people's profound gratitude and faith. People are faithful because God is faithful. Our roots in Judaism are very deep.

The whole purpose of liturgy is to strengthen the bonds of relationships. Together we gather in worship. Worship is always a public and communal action of shared prayer. As Jesus promised, gathered together, he's in our midst. Together we become Jesus body and blood. As the Church we are Jesus' mystical body in this world. We become one in Jesus, one with each other and Jesus becomes one with us. The ancient Jewish liturgy and ours today serve God's purpose for all to be one in God.

What is the meaning of sacrifice? As a kid, I always dreaded Lent. It meant having to give up some of my favorite things. It was always a hardship. Somehow, the image of giving up candy for God never took root in me. God never eats; what use does God have of a Snickers bar? As I've matured, as opposed to have gotten older, and there is a difference, I've seen something else. I have to make room for God in my life. I make an effort to pray. Solitude has become the experience I treasure. A sacrifice is an offering, not necessarily a hardship. In solitude, I can pray. One can think that we offer prayers to God. However prayer is what God has really offered to us. It's the means that God uses to enter our lives more intimately. I find that experiencing prayer from this point of view, deepens my experience of it. Without this insight, prayer is just talking to myself. Here I am more open to God's guidance and receptive to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

I see fasting in a similar light. My understanding of the power of a fast came from an off handed remark by a Benedictine monk. I have a classmate who used to be one. I would visit his monastery and the other monks when I visited him. One monk lamented as some of the brothers were on diets. "What ever happened to fasting?" he wondered. There is a difference between them. The fast leaves an opening for God to enter the hungry feeling. Since I can rarely resist pizza, God can stand between me and another slice. Visualizing God being so near gives strength upon which I can rely. So I'm not resisting temptation but seeking God who is near. The Lord is near when I am in trouble.

When Jesus is near, do my problems dissolve? No, they don't. Faith is not magic; it's trust. I can face my problems alone or with Jesus. In faith I can approach others for help. Troubles don't

vanish. They can be eased, handled and faced in the context and strength of relationships. The reality of life is that evil can be all around us and within us. Bad things can happen to us and we can do bad things. Jesus offered salvation not to take them away but to heal and forgive them. This is not what we expect, but it is what we need. God is near to the broken hearted and to sinners, of whom I am foremost.

Faith is a reality in yours and my life. God has gifted us with it. We believe in God and in Jesus. This changes us for we experience all of life through faith's filter. We can know God's presence and holiness in places we'd never expect. The last place we'd look is within ourselves. We know the sin of which we are capable and all the sins we have committed. Yet God forgives us. Why? God loves us with an infinite, eternal and unconditional love. When God looks into our souls, God sees God. We can love ourselves, others and God because God has loved us to life. We are God's beloved children just as each human being is God's beloved child. The entire human race, of which there is but one, is made in God's image and likeness. Seeing with eyes of faith is to see how God sees; in love.

In Paul's letter to the Romans this morning, he has stated the basic faith of the Church in Jesus. We call his description of it Kerygma. His reflection upon it is akin to the prayer that each faithful Jew would pray during the feast Shavuot. Calling on the name of the Lord is both a creed and a thanksgiving. It is a deeply expressed prayer to God who in turn strengthens God's bond of love with those who pray. Paul's words would be read aloud in community, as is the case today. Hearing these words is a communal endeavor. In this way God strengthens the community's relationships with each other. The ancient experience of Jews and Christians continues in us, through the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Why did Jesus enter the desert? In the previous chapter of Luke, he had just heard the voice of his Father, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." He went into the desert to prepare as he began his mission and ministry as God's beloved Anointed One; the Messiah. I would call this a retreat; a time of solitude, prayer and reflection. When I go on retreat, it is always for that. I have never sought out temptation as my goal. I have temptations all on my own. I seek God's presence not the presence of evil. Evil is always part of life. To seek God's presence is a life goal. One can find God while in pain, even in sin and when God feels far away. God will always surprise. Was Jesus surprised?

Jesus faced the reality of who he was, while in the desert. His mission, ministry and relation to his father became clear, if it wasn't already. Jesus was just like us in all but sin, we believe. Luke told us earlier in his story, "Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and humanity." It stands to reason that he faced temptations too. Unlike me and pizza, Jesus just didn't resist them; he triumphed. His death would mark his final triumph over sin and death. He would forgive sins and promise eternal life. Because we believe, these promises are ours. God forgives our sin and leads us to eternal life in God's Kingdom. Today's gospel is the presage of Jesus resurrection. Here Jesus assumes his identity and role as the Son of God, Messiah and Savior.

He is the power of God. He will not control others. He will never become a superman. He will never become the center of his own life. He became the one who serves God and others. He offers God's promise. The Father and each of us are his center. Through these temptations, God

led Jesus as the Beloved Son to begin the path that led to our salvation; to the cross, the empty tomb and God's right hand. The Spirit that led him into the desert, Jesus would then send to empower his Church. I point out that the Catholic Dictionary defines God's power as the magnificent out-pouring of love by the Holy Spirit. This is the Spirit that permeates this gospel passage. Can we know the same Spirit permeating our lives? Through faith, a gift of God, we can.

Sacrifice is the way of God to us. Jesus is the sacrifice that God offered for our sins. We believe because of that. In our moments of sacrifice we can know God's closeness as it can fill our empty places. We can know the extent of Jesus' sacrifice as we know God's forgiveness of us when we sin. Deliverance is not to be taken from one situation to another, better one. It is to know that God is near to the broken hearted, poor and sinners. In our need God is just a thought away.

May Jesus who face temptation be present in ours.

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