

1st Sunday of Lent

All living things need energy to sustain life – even the smallest single-cell creatures. They and we need to absorb the chemicals that will provide energy and water that will carry them through the body to where they are needed. This is true even for plants that can produce some of the food they need by reaction to the sunlight through photosynthesis. Human beings can survive for some time on the reserves of energy in their body fat but just a few hours without water.

Today's readings and the season of Lent are intended to remind us that we are not simply creatures of flesh and blood. We are also spiritual creatures made in the image and likeness of God. We cannot survive as truly human beings without God as the ultimate source of our energy and life. The water used in baptism not only cleanses us but is a sign of the life-giving Spirit who flows through us keeping us in union with God our Father. Likewise the Bread of Life that Christ gives us is essential for us to continue in the path Jesus sets before us. Writing to the Romans St Paul tells us that through the faith in our hearts which we profess on our lips God is very close to us. However desperate we are God will take care of us and save us if we call upon him. In our first reading Moses acknowledges that God has been with his people as they wandered through the desert and has now brought them to the Promised Land. For their part the people must acknowledge this by offering God the first fruits of the harvest.

As Our Lord prepares to begin his public ministry the Holy Spirit leads him into the desert. In his human nature he is to be put to the test – a day for each of the forty years the Israelites spent in the desert. Will he choose to put his trust in his Father? Will he allow the instinct for survival to come first? Our Lord is free from sin – but so was Adam! He has free choice. Neither the Devil nor Our Lord are playing games!

The first test concerns his very real physical needs. The Devil knows he is the Son of God. If he chooses he can transform stones into bread and so satisfy his hunger. 'Prove yourself – you don't need to go on suffering pangs of hunger! How can you fulfil your role if hunger makes you weak?' Of course it is a trick. To use his power in this way will show Jesus as weak and dependent on material things. He will repeat Adam's failure instead of showing how the grace of God can triumph over human weakness. Our Lord replies, "Man does not live on bread alone".

The second temptation is to take a short cut to power. Why spend three years preaching and then face death on the cross? "Worship me and the kingdoms of the world will be yours." Earthly glory may have been committed to the power of the Devil but it will turn to ashes as every empire on the face of the earth has done. It would be to trade eternal glory for a few years of fame. Moreover, this is not the kind of Kingship the Father intends for him. His kingship will be over human hearts and won by love not brute force. Above all it requires him to dethrone his Father and acknowledge the Devil as the Supreme Being – something unthinkable!

The final temptation is to manifest a spectacular demonstration of his divinity by throwing himself from the parapet of the Temple so that God will fulfil the promise in the Psalms that he will send his angel to rescue him from harm. Once again Our Lord rejects this option – faith is to be given freely not forced by such a demonstration of power. The Father will come to his aid – but at a time and in his own way. St Luke's perspective on this differs from St Matthew's. St Luke puts the second and third temptations in a different order and whereas St Matthew says that after the time of testing the angels came and ministered to him St Luke instead speaks of the Devil departing to return at the appointed time. For St Luke this happens in the Garden at Gethsemane when Jesus sweat falls off him like drops of blood and then God's angel appears to comfort him.

As Lent begins the Church invites us to reflect on the power of God to meet our needs. She invites us to put aside the temptation to comfort and self-sufficiency. Self-denial, whether through fasting or almsgiving, does not weaken us but brings us spiritual strength – but only when put in context by prayer. Dieting and generosity may be praiseworthy human activities but they need to be given a spiritual dimension by being made consciously expressions of our trust in God and our desire to put our lives at his disposal.