

## Readings for the First Sunday in Lent

26<sup>th</sup> February 2023

### First Reading: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?' The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die."' But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

### Second Reading: Romans 5:12-19

Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned – sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgement following one trespass brought condemnation but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so the act of righteousness of one leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one person's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

### Gospel: St Matthew 4:1-11

Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."' Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you," and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a

stone.” Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”’ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”’ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

### **A Reflection for the First Sunday in Lent**

‘Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven.’ These are the opening words of Psalm 32, the psalm set for today, although we choose not to use it in our services.

Forgiveness. In one of those odd coincidences the week before last, I heard two programs on the radio about forgiveness. One told the story of a man brought up in the 1960s and 70s in a Roman Catholic family living in a mixed area of Belfast, a family he described as being neither particularly Republican or Unionist. In 1984, in the second attack on their family home, his mother was killed by a bomb simply because they were Catholics. This man lived with years of anger and fear but eventually started working to help victims of The Troubles. In one meeting, he witnessed what he described as the triumph of forgiveness, the triumph of love over hate between others, and he too learned to forgive. He believes that forgiveness can bring peace and healing, a sentiment echoed by others who have suffered trauma at the hands of others and managed to reach that state of grace where forgiveness is possible.

There were other stories, and not everyone managed to forgive those who had harmed them in some way, for very understandable reasons. The theologians involved in the discussions pointed out that sincere forgiveness is a journey, and that the one word, ‘forgiveness’, does not have sufficient nuance for range of possible ways to forgive and degrees of forgiveness. One of the participants described true forgiveness as taking place within a framework of remorse, regret, repentance and, if possible, recompense, and said that forgiveness is often almost impossible if the perpetrator has not expressed some level of repentance.

Human response and human forgiveness of one another can be extremely costly which is why I described being able to truly forgive as a state of grace. Our forgiveness by God is also costly.

On this first Sunday in Lent, we have three texts which together give us hope of God’s willingness to forgive and accept those who repent. In a week which has seen the anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with all the suffering and tragedy that has entailed, and with so many other examples across the world of people suffering through the actions of others, the possibility of repentance and forgiveness is a message of hope that the world sorely needs.

In the reading from Genesis, we have the account of what is commonly known as ‘The Fall’. The stories in Genesis are generally regarded as allegorical, stories with spiritual significance rather than historical accuracy. Through these stories, we are told that God created a world that was perfect and good but which was marred by human beings giving in to temptation and making decisions that led to the loss of paradise, loss of innocence and loss of trust, all still hallmarks of the human condition.

In our Gospel reading, as is always the case on the first Sunday in Lent, we have the story of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness. In Matthew’s Gospel, this is the culmination of his introduction to Jesus. Prior to this, we have been given

the genealogy of Jesus, the account of his birth, and then his baptism by John in the river Jordan. Then, as we are told here, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil and fasted for forty days and forty nights.

This passage is full of symbolism. The number forty signifies an important period of time, as we heard at Candlemas. The idea of wilderness represents danger and is also a reminder of Israel's journey from Egypt to the Promised Land through the wilderness. The tempter, the devil or Satan, represents all those forces in the world that act against God and God's will. In the course of this account, Jesus is taken to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem, the centre of Israel's religious power and focus of Messianic hopes, the meeting point of heaven and earth. He is also taken to a very high mountain from which the whole world can be seen; as I mentioned last week, in the Bible mountains are places where God's power and glory are revealed but here, in a twist, the devil is trying to usurp that power.

Jesus is tempted to use his divine power to satisfy his own needs, he is challenged to put his life in God's hands to save himself, and he is offered power over the whole world without the need for the Cross. In each case, Jesus refuted the devil's temptation with a quotation from the Law, all of them coming from the Book of Deuteronomy, the last book of the Torah.

We can probably all identify with wilderness times in our lives, times of doubt, uncertainty and challenge, when it seems there is no way out. But, in the Bible, the wilderness is never the end; God makes a way in the wilderness as Isaiah tells us. Wilderness times can be times of learning and growth, of letting go of some things and taking up new things. But we should also acknowledge that they can also be times of real pain and sorrow which shouldn't be brushed aside. Yet we take heart that God is there with us, making a way, preparing us for what comes next. For Jesus, wilderness time was a time of preparation for his great mission to bring salvation to the world.

In the letter to the Romans, Paul draws these accounts from Genesis and the Gospel together, comparing and contrasting the wrongdoing of all humanity, personified though not named as Adam, and its myriad consequences, with the gifts of forgiveness, justification and eternal life that are freely available to us through Jesus Christ. This is not a comparison of equals: Jesus obedience and sacrifice defeats all of humanity's disobedience and wrongdoing

We all face temptation, and we all get things wrong in our lives, intentionally or unintentionally. But temptation and wrongdoing are not only matters of our personal choices; they are also embedded in the structures of our society in which we are complicit, whether we like it or not, simply by being part of society. We can think of the individualism, the consumerism, and, dare I say it, the capitalism, that can lead to so much harm to others, but especially the marginalised and the poor of the world. We all need the forgiveness of those we wrong, but especially we need the forgiveness of God, against whom all wrongdoing is ultimately an offence.

As I said earlier, human forgiveness for wrongs suffered at the hands of others can be extremely costly. Repentance may help. I also said that God's forgiveness is costly; it comes at a terrible price: the life of his Son. Repentance is an essential element. God's forgiveness should never be taken for granted, but it is freely available to all who truly repent.

Mercifully, we are not alone in this struggle against wrongdoing and our need to repent. The author of the letter to the Hebrews described Jesus saying, 'We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin' (4:15). Jesus knows and understand

our struggles. Jesus also knew that he was the 'Beloved' Son of God; he was reminded of that at his Baptism, immediately before going into the wilderness, and it helped give him the strength to say 'No' when he was tempted. And, no matter how enormous the difference between Jesus' relationship with God and ours is, we too can draw strength from knowing that we are also God's children; we too are God's 'Beloved'.

We also stand together as the Body of Christ. Together we respond to the love of God as we study God's word and share in worship, prayer and sacrament. Together we seek forgiveness in the words of the Confession.

I began with Psalm 32. This Psalm also says: Then I acknowledged my sin to you and I did not hide my iniquity; I said 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord', and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

'Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven.'