

Seton Hall University

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Celebrant's Guide and Commentary and Reflections for Sundays and Festivals (February 25, 2007)

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Celebrant's Guide and Commentary and Reflections for Sundays and Festivals

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FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT
February 25, 2007

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INTRODUCTION TO THE MASS

The trials and temptations of daily life constitute a great burden for many. Throughout Lent we acknowledge our burdens but we focus on the Paschal Mystery of Christ's death-and-resurrection as the divine gift of forgiveness and the fullness of life.

INVITATION TO REPENTANCE

Jesus obeyed the heavenly Father's will with humility, taking upon himself the burden of human sinfulness on our behalf. We ask forgiveness for the disobedience and pride that have alienated us from God's gifts.

Lord Jesus, you call us to become children of your Father. Lord have mercy.
Christ Jesus, you help us to rise from sin. Christ have mercy.
Lord Jesus, you send the Holy Spirit to heal and strengthen us. Lord have mercy.

HEADINGS FOR THE READINGS

First Reading (Deuteronomy 26:4-10). In the biblical tradition worship is linked intimately with the joys and sorrows of daily life and with the history of God's plan for humanity.

Second Reading (Romans 10:8-13). Christian faith centers on the death-and-resurrection of Jesus; it is expressed in prayer and lived by deeds of faithfulness.

Gospel (Luke 4:1-13). The temptations endured by Jesus may be encountered by all; the Christian response to such tests is a prayerful engagement with God's Word

PRAAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

President: As we reflect on the faith of the Church in the triumph of Jesus over temptation we ask the Good Shepherd to intercede for the Church and for each of us.

Reader(s):

May Jesus, the eternal high priest, give strength to Pope Benedict and all teachers in the Church to guide all who experience devastating trials. We pray to the Lord.

May families find strength to persevere when beset by difficulties and burdens. We pray to the Lord.

May the sick and suffering grow in faith by reflecting on the Passion of Jesus. We pray to the Lord.

May the bereaved be consoled by the ministry of the clergy and by their fellow parishioners. We pray to the Lord.

May all who approach death today have faith in God's mercy. We pray to the Lord.

President: We unite our prayers with the faithful throughout the world and with the heavenly court, through Christ our Lord.

INTRODUCTION TO THE LORD'S PRAYER

God has sent the Spirit of Jesus into our hearts, crying 'Abba, Father,' so we pray:

INVITATION TO THE SIGN OF PEACE

As we offer each other the sign of Christ's peace, we pray that we may become instruments of hope and love to all.

COMMUNION REFLECTION

Because Jesus declared "I am the Bread of Life," we rejoice in this gift which leads us to prepare for our share on his risen life. Joined to the Vine, we find the strength to go forth and bear fruit in his Name.

COMMENTARY

First Reading (Deuteronomy 26:4-10). The Book of Deuteronomy (in Greek this means "the second giving of the Law") presents two long sermons of Moses just before his death (chapters 1-11), followed by a code of laws (ch. 12-26) and a covenant-ceremony at the entry into the promised Land. This was completed by Moses' farewell addresses, including a song and blessing of the twelve tribes. Joshua and Caleb (the two spies who encouraged an early entry into the Land) are the only ones surviving from the Exodus to make the transition to the new stage of Israel's service of the one God. All the others were born during the forty years of wandering in the wilderness.

The Deuteronomic Code began with a command to remove all sites of worship frequented by the nations (12:2-3). Such practices were not to be imitated "but you shall seek the place which the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his Name and make his habitation there" (12:5). After King David had conquered Jerusalem and made it the capital of the unified kingdom, a spiritual unity was fostered by bringing the ark of the Covenant to rest there (2 Sam 6:1-15). Although Jerusalem is not mentioned in Deuteronomy the theology of a unique place for Israelites to worship motivated the prophets and King Josiah, who reigned from 640-609 B.C., to campaign for the Temple built by Solomon against all competition.

Sacrificial worship in this place was the context for people to "eat before the LORD your God and you shall rejoice, you and all your household, in all that you undertake, in which the LORD your God has blessed you" (Deut 12:6-7). Deuteronomy presented the three pilgrimage feasts in detail (16:1-17), with the specification that pilgrims were "not to appear before the LORD empty-handed; every man shall give as he is able..." (16:16-17)..

The first fruits were a tithe representing the best of the harvest as a token of gratitude, for all the produce of the soil was God's gift. "You shall go to the priest... and say to him: 'I declare this day to

the LORD your God that I have come into the Land which the LORD swore to our fathers to give us” (Deut 26:3). This is followed by the declaration proclaimed as the first reading.

Most people like to think back to the time that their nation or tribe was free and powerful. A glorious account of their ancestors’ achievements is the basis for hope that the dismal or mediocre present will not endure. However, in this liturgy Israelites did not celebrate their forbears as great warriors or rulers; rather, they recalled their state of dire need and celebrated God’s victory and gift of freedom in a Land where they could serve him alone.

This service was complete when worship moved people to care for the poor in their midst (Deut 12:12; 16:14; 26:11). When Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 15:11 to tell his disciples that “the poor you will always have with you” (Jn 12:8), he was reminding them of the continuing challenge of these commandments. “For you always have the poor with you, *and whenever you will you can do good to them*, but you will not always have me” (Mk 14:7).

Psalm 91:1-2, 10-15. This prayer of confidence has offered assurance to the faithful over the centuries that God protects all who take refuge in him.

Second Reading (Romans 10:8-13). The entire Lenten season should foster a profound reflection on the Paschal Mystery and on Christian Baptism (see Rom 6:3-4). The preceding context of the Sunday passage from Romans offers St. Paul’s interpretation of Deut 30:11-13. The Israelites were challenged to “turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut 30:10; see 6:4-5). This commandment is not too difficult or remote for people of faith. “It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up for us to heaven...?’ Neither is it beyond the sea that you should say, ‘Who will go over the sea for us...?’ But the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it” (Deut 30:11-14). It seems that Paul drew upon a tradition that interpreted this text with reference to the Messiah, in the light of the ministry of Moses and Jonah. Moses had ascended Mt. Sinai to bring God’s Word to Israel, an anticipation of the Incarnation, when “the Word became flesh” (see Jn 1:14). Jonah’s adventure with the giant fish was seen to prepare people for the three days and nights that the Son of Man would spend in the earth (Mt 12:40). This proximity of God’s Word to Israel prepared the way for Christians to proclaim their faith in the work of God the Father who raised Jesus from the dead. Faith comes through hearing God’s Word because preachers were commissioned to spread the Good News (Rom 10:14-17). The listening attitude demanded by Deut 6:4 may touch the hearts of both Jews and Gentiles who are aware of their need for divine riches. Like Peter (Acts 2:21), Paul invoked the prophet Joel’s promise that “all who call upon the Name of the Lord shall be delivered” (2:32). Christians believe that Jesus inaugurated the first stage of God’s Kingdom through his death-and-resurrection. Through his sacrificial gift of forgiveness and reconciliation (deliverance from evil) he brought the grace of peace in communion with the Father (salvation).

Gospel (Luke 4:1-13). The public ministry of Jesus is described by St. Luke as the time wherein peace would come to humankind (2:14; 19:38) through the pilgrimage of Jesus and his disciples to the Temple. “When the days drew near for him to be received up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem” (9:51). The infancy narrative pointed to this orientation to the place chosen by the LORD (see Deut 26:2) by the presentation of Jesus in the Temple (Lk 2:22-38) and his youthful decision to remain in Jerusalem after the Passover pilgrimage (2:41-51). This choice to be with Father for three days may well have sacrificial connotations and points those listening to the Gospel to the passion and resurrection. In this Sunday’s Gospel Luke’s ordering of the three temptations to a climax with Jesus being taken to the Jerusalem Temple seems to develop the same theological insight. Jesus willed to

serve his Father under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, so he rejected the temptation to presume upon his status as Son of God in order to claim any divine prerogative. These would be used for the service of others.

The Gospel tradition stressed the importance of Deuteronomy for Jews of the Second Temple period. The daily prayers of every pious person included taking the yoke of faith in the one God and the yoke of the commandments, epitomized by the call for an interior response of love with all one's heart, soul (life) and strength (Deut 6:4-5). This threefold challenge was interpreted by the great teachers of Israel to emphasize submission of the human evil impulse to the good and complete response to the divine will (the heart), the willingness to die rather than commit a sin of idolatry, murder or adultery (life) and the dedication of all one's possessions (strength) to the service of God. This is the first commandment, the key to understanding how the Law is ordered to promote a total commitment to the one God (Lk 10:25-28; see Mt 22:34-40).

Both Matthew and Luke show that Jesus responded to each temptation by quoting Deuteronomy. Along with the forty day time frame for this episode, this reminds listeners that Jesus' success in rejecting Satan was linked to a profound union with his Father's will, expressed for Israel and the Church in the commandments. The response "Man shall not live by bread alone" (Deut 8:3) follows a description of the forty years in the wilderness, when God tested the people "to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep the commandments or not" (8:2). The exclusive worship of God with a service that pervaded all aspects of daily life was extremely difficult in foreign lands, so Israel was given "the land flowing with milk and honey" (Deut 26:9) and a special place for offering tokens of obedience. Luke showed that, like the pilgrims of every generation, Jesus ordered his entire life to the service of God the Father, exercising his ministry to draw "great multitudes" into his company (Lk 14:25). They too would be equipped with God's Word to offset the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil.

REFLECTION

The problem of sin and temptation seems to be ignored by many in our society, or explained as part of a psychological theory that denies free will. However, the public interest focused on the sensational accusations about the rich and famous is perhaps an indication that standards of personal morality have not been eroded entirely. In each case it seems obvious that "somebody should have known better!"

During the season of Lent, the Church points out the social consequences of sin and "must impress on the minds of the faithful the distinctive character of penance as a detestation of sin because it is an offense against God. The role of the Church in penitential practices is not to be passed over, and the need to pray for sinners should be emphasized" (Vatican II, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* #109).

Both good and evil in the moral order are evaluated in the context of our relationship with God and neighbor. To help us appreciate our solidarity with others as God's people, the liturgy draws upon a description of Temple liturgy from the Book of Deuteronomy. The bond forming individuals into a people transcends the ages. Each generation can identify with those ancestors who wandered from Mesopotamia to Egypt and with Moses and those he led out of slavery into the service of God in their own land. In times of peace and abundance people tend to consider themselves self-sufficient; then they often forget their bond to God and the community. The offering of first-fruits of the harvest during Temple worship was an occasion throughout the year to thank God for the gifts of land and rain (Dt. 26:10). The tithe was given to the Levite, the stranger, the orphan and the widow, reminding the farmer of his obligation toward the less fortunate in his midst (Dt 26:12-15).

The Gospel describes Jesus undergoing the same temptations that we all face in the varied circumstances of life. "We have a high priest who has been tempted in every way that we are, though he is without sin" (Heb 4:15). Matthew and Luke depict the drama as a three-step contest between Jesus and the devil. The first temptation is to use divine power for self-gratification. The need for life's necessities, such as food, should be satisfied through the fabric of our human relationships, through the exercise of our natural talents. In the Lord's prayer, the petition for daily bread is in the *plural*. Jesus' response adds the perspective of the spiritual order, quoting from Deuteronomy. "Not by bread alone does one live but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of the Lord" (8:3).

The desire for power and wealth can replace God as the center of a person's life and thus constitute idolatry. Jesus is tempted to gain all the world's kingdoms with their power and glory. He rejects the temptation to align with forces of evil and uses Deuteronomy 6:13 to express his commitment to the one God. A good end never justifies the choice of wrong means!

In Luke's third temptation the devil abused the Scriptures (Ps 91:11-12) to insinuate that the title "Son of God" would permit Jesus to be rescued miraculously if he were to jump from the heights of the Temple. Do some Christians expect God to do great things for them merely for their self-aggrandizement? The temptation of presumption must be rejected as resolutely as the tendency to despair that afflicts some people. Beware of those who make facile use of Scripture! Jesus puts the psalm in the proper context by a basic principle: "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test!" (Dt 6:16). We are obliged to serve God, so it is folly to demand that God rescue us from our own stupidity.

Luke comments that the devil left Jesus, to await another opportunity (4:13); this came through the weakness of Judas Iscariot (22:3). Jesus took a risk in choosing human collaborators, and he continues to do so through the ages. Are we learning the lessons of the temptations? Does our Lenten penance include an effort to remedy the tragic consequences of sin?