

First Sunday of Lent B/2018

The readings of this first Sunday of Lent talk about the power of overcoming evil. They show us that life is like a fight we have to win in order to spiritually survive. They invite us to realize that even when we fail in our battle, God gives us always a second chance so that we start again.

The first reading tells us the story of Noah and the rescue of the species of the earth from the flood. Then, it describes the covenant God concluded with Noah after the big flood that devastated the earth. Finally, it shows how God wants the life of his creatures to continue and how he wants to protect it from destruction.

What is behind this text is the idea that God is merciful. There is also the idea that in spite of human sin, God wants his creation to continue and to prosper.

This text allows us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus is led into the desert by the Spirit in order to be tempted by the devil. First, the Gospel says that Jesus stayed in the desert forty days. It also says that he was among the beasts and that the angels served him. After that episode in the desert, the Gospel says that Jesus came to Galilee where he started preaching about God's kingdom. Finally, the Gospel gives the content of Jesus' preaching, which was about the fulfillment of God's time by inviting people to the repentance of their sins and the belief in the Gospel.

What do we learn from today's readings? Today I want to talk about the necessity of repentance. Repentance is at the heart of our Christian life and at every step of our spiritual life. Without repenting of our sins, it is impossible to please God and to be a good Christian.

Moreover, repentance is a necessary condition for receiving salvation, because if we do not align our hearts and our life with God's law and demands, we cannot have any relationship with him.

The repentance of sins is so important that at the beginning of each Mass, we are exhorted to ask forgiveness of God for our sins so that we might be worthy of celebrating the sacred mysteries. When the moment of Holy Communion approaches, we do the same thing by asking again forgiveness of God of our sins so that we might be found worthy of receiving the risen Lord who comes to us in the Eucharist.

A question that comes up here is this: Why is the Church insisting so much on repentance? Why is repentance so important to her that she reminds us continually to purify our hearts and to adjust them to the reality of God's kingdom?

In fact, we are undeniably surrounded by many good and positive things in this world. Those things bring us a lot of happiness and joy as we enjoy them and use them for our benefit. But, besides these, there are also bad and negative things that exercise such an attraction on us that we are very often tempted to abandon easily the ways of God and his righteousness, and to follow the ways of the devil.

We all know by experience, for instance, that it happens often that the good we want to do is not always what we do in our life. We are sometimes so surprised to realize that we act in such a selfish way as though we never heard the word of God and his recommendations to love as he loves and to treat others as we would like to be treated.

Moreover, we know by experience that it is easy to recite God's commandments, but it is more difficult to observe them and to put them into practice. It is just a question of being honest with ourselves. Given such a reality, the first Sunday of Lent reminds us that we should not forget that we are in a fight against evil. It is not because there are positive and good things going on around us and in the world that the evil has ceased existing. The proof we have about it is the life of Jesus himself who fought in the desert with Satan as he was tempted and pushed to abandon the ways of God. But, Satan did not triumph over him. On the contrary, Jesus had victory over him by his obedience to the Father and by using the power of the word of God, by fasting and praying to the Father.

That is very good news that should make us happy, namely the assurance that as Jesus triumphed, we too can win when we have him at our side. The things Jesus has done in order to win victory over evil are exactly what the Church expects us to do at this time of Lent, namely fasting, praying, plus alms-giving and the meditation of the word of God.

We do not do those things for their sake, but as a way of reviving our fidelity to Jesus and of renewing our covenant with God. For Jesus, indeed, this is the time of the kingdom of God, a time of the fulfillment of the promises of God to be always with us until the end of the world.

Anyone who wants to triumph over Satan should stop counting on himself and his own strength. He should leave the past behind him and take the word of God as his weapon of combat. That is why, Jesus says that "the kingdom is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel".

What will happen to us when we repent and believe in the Gospel? Well, if we do those things, we will certainly renew our covenant with God as Noah did at that time of destruction of the creatures of the earth. That is why Lent is a time for all of us to renew our fidelity to the Lord, to regain our place in the ark of his Church and live under his rainbow.

In that sense, Lent opens the door for us to enter the ark once again. Staying out of the ark is to expose ourselves to countless dangers which can in the end destroy us. Our security and our survival depend on how we are capable of re-entering the ark.

Moreover, Lent is a time of a second chance. It is an opportunity that God gives us so that we start again from where we have failed and stumbled. It is also a time of trusting God's mercy toward us in order to hope for a bright future in spite of our failures of the past.

Mistakes and failures are part of the human journey, but the journey is not over; it is still before us. Will we just drop our arms and sit down because of the wounds we received in battle? No. We cannot do that. Therefore, let us take seriously this time of Lent and renew our fight against evil. Let us stand up and start again. Let us re-enter the ark in order to be saved. Let us renew our covenant with God and his Church. May God bless you!

Genesis 9: 8-15; 1 Peter 3: 18-22; Mark 1: 12-15

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