

Homily of First Sunday of Lent Year C

Moses did not reach the Promised Land. However, he prescribed for the Israelites laws and directives they were to keep in the Promised Land that would guide their relationship with God and with one another. The first reading was a pronouncement to be made during the feast of harvest thanksgiving. The pronouncement summarizes Israel's history and journey with God from their ancestors to their settling in the Promised Land. The offering of the first fruits from one's farm and the pronouncement were an expression of gratitude to God for his blessings. The reading encourages us to be grateful to God for his love and mercy, and to express our gratitude practically by offering to the Church of God from the blessings we have received.

On offering to the Church Sirach 35:6-13 says, "Do not appear before the Lord empty-handed, for all that you offer is in fulfillment of the precepts. The offering of the just enriches the altar: a sweet odor before the Most High. The sacrifice of the just is accepted, never to be forgotten. With a generous spirit pay homage to the Lord, and do not spare your freewill gifts. With each contribution show a cheerful countenance, and pay your tithes in a spirit of joy. Give to the Most High as he has given to you, generously, according to your means. For he is a God who always repays and will give back to you sevenfold." Luke 6:38, "Give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you." The Church uses the offering to serve humanity, carry out the work of evangelization, and build up God's kingdom here on earth.

For us in St. Francis of Assisi Parish, the reading is very meaningful. When 2017 Hurricane Harvey and its flood caused catastrophic damage to our church and hall buildings, we had nowhere to celebrate Mass and perform other spiritual exercises. We became 'wandering worshipers.' We gathered outdoors on the church ground to celebrate the Mass. Later, we got a donation of a tent, which sheltered us from sun and rain. We could no longer stay outdoors to celebrate Mass when winter arrived. We moved and squeezed ourselves into the parish garage (which we renamed 'Providence House'). The garage had no insulation which made the winter cold and the summer heat almost unbearable. Yet, we stood our ground! We continued to celebrate Mass in it until the parish hall was reconstructed a year later. Our first Mass in the reconstructed church building was last weekend, about eighteen months after the experience of Hurricane Harvey. We have every reason to thank God for his grace and mercy, and for leading and guiding us through the rough, tempting and trial times. We all have our individual and family journeys, experiences and testimonies of God's saving grace for which we need to be grateful and thankful to him.

The devil does not want us to have good relationship with our good and gracious God. He comes with all kinds of temptations to draw us away from God. The Gospel story of the temptation of Jesus by the devil shows us some subtle ways the devil uses to tempt us in order to draw us away from God. The first temptation shows us that the devil tempts and tries to separate us from God through our needs. The temptation is usually for us to go for what we need through improper means, that is to turn stone to bread. The second temptation shows us that the devil tempts and tries to separate us from God by making us worship and derive authority and glory from the things of this world rather than derive authority and glory from God. The third temptation shows how the devil desires to disconnect us from God by making us lose the virtue of self-content and trust in God but engage in harmful and dangerous ambitious activities for a better life (throw oneself down from pinnacle of the temple).

If the devil tempted Jesus who is God, he will tempt us more who are mere human beings. 1 John 5:19 warns, "We know that we are children of God, [but] the whole world is under the control of the evil one." 1 Peter 5:8-9 also warns, "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith..." St. Augustine encourages us where he writes, "Our pilgrim life here on earth cannot be without temptation, for it is through temptation that we make progress, and it is only by being tempted that we come to know ourselves." The following words from the second reading are very encouraging too, "No one who believes in [Jesus] will be put to shame... For every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved." Let the name of Jesus, the name that is above every name, be in our hearts and on our lips. It is by the power of his name that we triumph over every temptation as he himself did. I wish you a spirit-filled Lenten Season.

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