

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The First Sunday of Lent (Year A) 26th February 2023

It all begins in a garden. In fact it will all end in a garden, too, a garden of betrayal, burial and resurrection, but having begun in a garden, today it pauses in a desert. Adam and Eve faced temptation in a beautiful place, a place that was entrancing and delightful. Even there, in a place where they were free of the problems we face in our lives, they fail in the struggle against temptation (in fact, they don't seem to have struggled very hard with it at all). It is the tree that is the problem; the tree of life is turned by them into the tree of death. Of course, we know that the story ends with Jesus turning a very different sort of tree, a tree with only two branches, from the tree of death into the tree of life. But that is a long way ahead. To Adam and Eve it must have seemed as if this wretched tree has ended everything. They were not to know that the Father has a plan to undo their failure.

It seems strange, doesn't it. Adam and Eve know about this tree. They know that it is dangerous, but they walk past it in the heart of the garden day after day and never give it a second look. Then the serpent comes along and makes them look at the tree again. And as their eyes dwell on it, it appears to them different. *"And the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and that it was lust to the eyes and the tree was lovely to look at, and she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave to her man with her, and he ate."* (Gen 3.6 trans Robert Alter). The serpent has planted in Eve's mind the possibility that she might possess this tree, that she might make it hers and do with its fruit as she wishes, and as soon as the idea of possession has entered her head the tree becomes lust for the eyes and lovely to look at, and she must possess it; and the serpent's work is done and he can slip quietly away.

All in all it is a sorry sort of tale. Adam and Eve had it all, and they throw it all away. They were able to enjoy the garden, to revel in its beauty and its completeness, its perfect harmony; but as soon as they want to do more than enjoy it, as soon as they want to possess it, they lose it all. The desire to possess is slipped into the human mind by the Devil, and from that day to this every one of us is infected by it. It poisons common life and makes us all strangers to one another. My desire to possess material things puts me in competition with you, because you want to possess them too, and there can be no harmony. My desire to possess other people – to make them do as I want, to turn them into my playthings, always focussed on pleasing me, means that I will always see them as objects, never see them as fully human. My desire to possess recognition and praise distorts everything I do and undermines all my motivation. My desire to possess power makes me a sort of monster, scrambling over everyone else to make sure I end up at the top of the heap.

When the Devil appears again in our Gospel reading, he is in a very different environment. There is not much beauty here, not much delight, and the fasting Jesus is at his weakest. The Devil needs to strike now, because humility (which is the opposite of the will to possess) is fatal to the Devil's cause. True humility is a radical decision not to be governed by the will to possess, and it leaves the Devil powerless. So a little simple possession is offered. Use the power to turn stones into bread for your own comfort; use your relationship with the Father to demonstrate his love

and his power; reach out and grasp at power, possess it. The Devil won the struggle in the garden, but loses the struggle in the desert.

What does this tell us about our keeping of Lent? Pope Benedict used to ask two questions for Lent:

“What really counts in my life?”

“What place does God have in my life? Is he the Lord, or am I?”

(General Audience 13th February 2013)

These are the questions that Jesus went into the wilderness to confront. And so, in fact, although in his hunger he must have appeared weak and vulnerable to the Devil, the reality is that he emerges from the forty days stronger than ever. His time spent with the Father has given him absolute clarity. He knows exactly what matters in his life; and he knows that the Father is in charge. However weak his body may be, his soul is absolutely strong.

Those two questions from Pope Benedict help us understand our own lives very clearly. They help us to understand our own vulnerabilities, our own besetting sins, our own most dangerous moments. ‘What really counts in my life?’ will govern all my decisions, even if I am not aware of it. For example if what matters most in my life is that people admire me and think I am clever, I will do all that I can to make them think that – and in doing so I may well miss much more important and fruitful things that will radically help people around me, but will not benefit my reputation at all.

‘What really matters in my life?’ Surely it must be to live the sort of life that Jesus did, set free from the will to possess, and so free to experience real joy, the joy that is closed off to those so anxious to win in the struggle against the other. Surely it must be to help other people get to Heaven, and to become more and more the sort of person who will feel at home in Heaven. Isn’t it true that so much of our obsession with making ourselves look important, or successful, or influential really comes from our failure to believe in Heaven? If you don’t believe in Heaven, you alone are responsible for making a splash now, being recognised now. But if you believe in Heaven there is no need to make a splash at all – God knows you and loves you and you are infinitely special to him, and always will be. Isn’t that enough? It is enough. To get to Heaven and help others get there, that is enough.

So, our homework for Lent is to reflect on this:

“What really counts in my life?”

“What place does God have in my life? Is he the Lord, or am I?”