

## Lent 1

1. On this first Sunday of Lent we are offered a study in contrast. Our first reading is from the third chapter of Genesis and tells the story of the tempting of the first couple and their fall. The Gospel for today, on the other hand, tells the story of Jesus' being tempted and his victory over his tempter. The second reading from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans presents both these events given to us as stories in a more abstract form, that is, in Paul's contrast between the first man, Adam, and the second man, Jesus.

2. What is the Church trying to teach us by presenting us with this contrast on this first Sunday of Lent? It must have something to do with temptation.

Therefore, perhaps we should begin with a simple definition of what a temptation is. Here is one way of defining temptation: temptation is that which turns us

away from what is good and towards something which is evil. We will have to presume for the moment that we all know when something is good and when something is bad. That is a fair presumption, at least in a very general way. We all know that we have a little voice in us that tells us that something is good or something is bad. We call this little voice our conscience.

3. When someone tells us a story, we suspend judgment about what can be real. For example, in this story of the first fall there is a talking serpent. Most of us don't ordinarily believe in talking serpents, but we suspend our disbelief for the sake of the story. A commentator tells us that the author of this story chose the serpent to be the evil one because serpents played an idolatrous role in the fertility rites of the Canaanites, Israel's neighbors. In other words, the author is depriving the serpent of its association with

the divine and reducing it to the one who tempts human beings. However, despite this helpful information, it seems we have to admit that there is a difficulty here because despite the evil role the serpent now plays in the story, the story also tells us that the serpent is God's creation and therefore has to be seen as originally good, for all that comes from God's hands is good. Perhaps what we were all taught, that before our fall there was another fall, the fall of an angel of light, Lucifer, can help. Is this cunning serpent Lucifer in another form? In any case, note that evil is here portrayed as originating not from inside ourselves but from outside us, from someone or something else.

4. Now we have the play. The serpent tempts the woman and does so by misinterpreting God's command: "Did God really tell you not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?" The woman corrects

him: “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; it is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said: ‘You shall not eat it or even touch it, lest you die.’” But God had not said anything about not touching the tree. Therefore, Eve also distorts God’s command. And so the commentator adds: “Sin begins with some distortion of the truth.”

5. God has told them that if they ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they would die. The serpent now tells them: “You certainly will not die. No, God knows well that the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know what is good and what is bad.” The woman takes the bait. She eats. So too does her husband, and their eyes are opened. But what they now see is their own shame. They realize they are naked. Their innocence is gone.

6. Our reading for today ends here, but in the bible the story goes on to talk about how God used to converse with the couple in the evening in their beautiful garden. But now when they hear him coming, they hide because they are ashamed to appear naked before him. When God finds them, he says to the man: Who told you that you were naked? You have eaten from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And now the blaming begins. The man says: She gave me the fruit, and so I ate it. And she says: the serpent tricked me into it.

7. Then the punishments begin: the serpent will crawl on his belly and eat dirt. The woman will suffer more pain in giving birth, and the man will be her master. The man will have to struggle to get food from the earth. He will earn his bread by the sweat of his

brow. And then he will return to the dust from which he came.

8. The author of this story knew our world, the world of distortion of the truth and the world of the blaming of others. He imagined an earlier world before the birth of lies and blame, and he teaches us that this earlier world was lost because of human sinfulness.

9. Most of us don't believe in a Garden of Eden, an original paradise. But some of us do suppose that human beings only emerged after a long period of preparation in the animal world. Could we not say that this long period of pre-human life and history is like the Garden of Eden in the sense that there was not yet a knowledge of good and evil, there was not yet a creature who could hear God speaking to him about what is good and evil. But when that conversation began, human history began. And what

the story tells us that it began with a sinful act. And that is the world in which we have lived every since.

10. We cannot go back to a pre-moral innocence. That would be a step backward in every sense of the word. But if we are to move forward, we must learn to tell the truth and take responsibility for our actions. But we need help to do that. Our faith tells us that the help is there. Jesus has overcome the evil one, and with his help we can do the same. Let us ask the Lord to help us to fact the truth in our lives and to avoid its distortions. Let us ask the Lord for help to take responsibility for our lives, especially for our sins