**THE LENTEN SEASON**

The word ‘lenten’ originated from the Saxon as ‘lengthen’ because the days of spring ‘lengthen’. (It is only used for the Christian season in English. On the Continent, it is still reserved for ‘spring’) It climaxes on Good Friday, which coincided with the beginning of the Jewish Passover festival. In Christianity’s first three centuries there was a three day fast before Holy Saturday but those preparing for their Baptism on that day would have fasted longer.

(Fasting did not mean complete abstinence but dieting. The practice was partly to identify with those who did not have enough to eat through famine)

The Church was decriminalised in 313 A. D. and Christianity suddenly became the side to support. There was a flood of new converts, some of poor quality, many with their eyes to the main chance. So there was imposed a forty day general fast partly intended to deter the opportunists.

Our choice of the readings during Lent has been made to prepare the people of God for participation in the paschal feast. The Old Testament readings focus on Israel's history as a preparation for the work of Christ. The New Testament readings are either reflections on the crucifixion or its implications for the disciple.

**FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT**

**6th March 2022**

**Reading I: Deuteronomy 26:4-10**

The passage is eminently suited for reading at Mass because it describes a liturgical ceremony – even with written-in rubrics. Its ostensible situation is with Moses in the desert. However, it displays detailed knowledge of settled life in Canaan with its crops. The passage describes the ceremony of offering the first produce of each

harvest. (Each crop had its own harvest according to the season.) The first of each crop to be harvested was to be placed in a large (!) basket and offered to Yahweh at his shrine.

In the second paragraph in the Sunday Missal the case suddenly changes from the third person (a wandering Aramean i.e. Jacob and a nation i.e. Judaism) to the first person (us i.e. the worshipper). This ‘creed’ was recited at the 6th century B.C. harvest festivals to unite the nation with 16th century B.C. patriarchs.

This intergenerational feature is deeply rooted in Jewish culture, uniting its members throughout history. Crucially, the thought was carried over into the Eucharist which also unites Christians of every generation in the presence of Christ. To my mind this is undoubtedly the germ of the Real Presence, but to the extent that also unites us with Christians throughout history.

When read at the beginning of Lent, the emphasis shifts from the offering of the first fruits to the confession of faith that accompanies the offering (vv. 5-9).

It is perhaps the most important passage of the Pentateuch or even the entire Old Testament. It declared what God had done. It expressed faith in him. It bound his people into a unity. For the formation of the second covenant, the same function was supplied by 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 as the kernel of the early Christian Gospel.

What Christ's death and resurrection are to the New Testament, the Exodus is to the Old Testament. Both stories are the hearts of the two traditions. In each case the mighty acts of God lead to a confession of faith, a recital of those mighty acts. The readings of the following Sundays will spell out individual items in greater detail.

**Responsorial Psalm: 91:1-2, 10-15**

Psalm 91 is traditional on this Sunday. It was this psalm that the devil quoted in the temptation story—at the third temptation in Luke. The devil misapplied the promise of angelic assistance, and verses 14-15 correct it. Only those who set their love upon God can expect him to deliver them. For that reason Christ was delivered: he, more than all others, set his love upon his Father. The Resurrection became the other face of the Crucifixion, - two aspects of one event.

**Reading II: Romans 10:8-13**

Here we have the earliest New Testament confession of faith ‘Jesus is Lord’ (v. 9) corresponding to the Old Testament confession in the first reading. This confession is the heart of the catechetical instruction given to the candidates before baptism and would have been recited at it.

Such simple confessions, as we find them in the New Testament, are the nuclei out of which grew first the baptismal Apostles’ Creed and later, conciliar creeds (Nicaean and Athanasian). The same confession is also found in the heart of the great Eucharistic Prayer.

The unity of the Church, despite the pluralism of its members (Jew, Greek, slave, free etc.) the unity of the New Testament, despite the variety of its expressions of the Christian message; the unity of the liturgy, despite the existence of different Eucharistic Canons, lie in this common, basic confession: God has raised Jesus from the dead and made him Lord.

**Gospel Luke 4:1-13**

The confrontation of Jesus and Satan occurs in Matthew and Luke and is briefly mentioned by Mark. I may be wrong, but I have the impression that people think of the story as ...........

a} being unique to Jesus, because he was a special case. The story describes something that is not experienced by ordinary people. The image of Jesus arguing with Satan as if they shared a park bench is difficult for us to visualise and so we attribute it to the difference between Jesus and ourselves.

We have a similar problem next week with the story of the Transfiguration. It is difficult to accept as an objective description and we are tempted to relegate it to the top shelf with the Magi and the Ascension stories. But, if we understand the stories as Luke intended, we will find them more familiar than we thought.

b) a ‘one-off’ in the sense that when the forty days were completed, Satan retired, defeated and left Jesus alone, at least until his passion. The implication is that during his ministry he did not suffer temptation! (Luke 22:3) The ‘forty’ is symbolic, representing completeness.

I believe that both these ideas miss the meaning of the story. ‘Matthew’ and Luke drew on a common source for the story. Luke's temptation narrative is very close to that of Matthew 4:1-11 except that one of them inverts the order of the last two temptations. We do not know which was original. Matthew's order is more logical and without being certain, it is possible that Luke changed the order so that the series may end at Jerusalem. In any case the temptations are like the scenery on a stage, the ministry of Jesus taking place amongst them.

Temptation is not unique to Jesus. We too are tempted, and Jesus was tempted in the same way as we are. And neither is it a story that happened and then came to a full stop. Jesus was tempted all his life from the beginning to the end. But the daily temptations throughout his ministry are here encapsulated in this dramatic incident at the beginning to set the scene, against which the rest of his life was played out.

The three temptations are examples of the three classes of weakness with which we are all only too familiar.

One. The temptation to turn stones into bread. You might think that this does not apply to you. You couldn't if you wanted to! But it does. It is the temptation to use the power you have for your own material ends. We all have power, to some degree, and even the one with very little power is tempted to use what he has to make his life more comfortable, easier. This is what we call Materialism.

It covers all our physical needs. Luxuries and Indulgence, but also a reliance on ordinary material things. We substitute material possessions for God and think we can do without him.

Two. And the second one is Spiritual. For this is the temptation to replace God with Satan. All our spiritual relationships are at risk here. Pride, Avarice, Greed, Jealousy, and the thin end of the wedge is Compromise. We compromise with Satan. We do this when we say that we are good enough. Good enough, for what? We fall for this temptation when we envy someone else, when we are resentful, bitter, harsh.

Three. At the third level, Satan challenges Jesus to jump from the south-east corner of the temple wall on the edge of the Kedron valley and land unharmed.

In the classic panoramic view of Jerusalem from across the valley it is the end of the wall on the left. The temptation was in short, to use his powers as publicity for his Ministry. This comes to us also. For we are all tempted to impress people and conscious of our ‘image’. We all want to be popular. Thought well of. If the first sin is called Material, then the second is Spiritual and the third becomes Moral for it covers the motives for all our behaviour.

The temptations of Jesus are the temptations of Christians of all ages: the temptation to seek one's own glory even in religious matters; to seek the easy way and turn aside from suffering; the temptation to forget that the source of Christian life is to be found in the death and resurrection of Christ.

Jesus redeemed humankind as the Suffering Servant, as Son of Man, by taking human nature on himself and uniting himself fully with his fellow men and women. We, in our turn, are redeemed by uniting ourselves with Christ, in his death and resurrection, by resisting sin and the temptations to it that assail us on many sides. It is these truths that the Church wishes to keep before our minds during Lent.