

**Homily for February 29, 2004
First Sunday of Lent Cycle C**

By Father Charles Bowes

**1 Deuteronomy 26:4-10
Romans 10:8-13
Luke 4:1-13**

Dare we use this Lent to trust God's mercy rather than earn it?

Strange as it may seem, it is very difficult for many of us to accept gifts. When we do receive them, we feel compelled to reciprocate in kind. We often believe that we must earn what we get. Perhaps we do not want to be beholden to others, or we are convinced that we do not deserve any such gift. Or maybe we want to be assured that what is ours is really ours, with no strings attached.

In a slightly different vein, we are also convinced that we must make up time lost at school or at work. There is a certain level of performance that is expected by us and by others. We are bound to meet it and, if possible, to exceed it. Too often, we gauge our worth by the quality of our accomplishments.

These attitudes often carry over into our understanding of our faith, particularly during Lent. We perceive this season as a time to make amends, to perform acts of devotion that will balance the scales. This is quite futile, because we will never really be able to balance the scales. And if we look carefully at the readings for Lent, we will discover that God does not

require this of us. The readings all through the season show us that salvation is a gift from God, not a reward earned – and that we are invited to trust that the gift is real and to receive the gift. Lent is for trusting God and receiving God's gifts.

All of the first readings on the Sundays of Lent recount episodes from Israel's history that show God's graciousness to the people. The passages from the epistles all highlight the role Christ played in our salvation. The Gospel readings reveal Jesus' glory even in the face of suffering, as well as the compassion and mercy of God. Any call to repentance is only indirect. The readings assure us how much God has loved us. Their message is: Be grateful. Trust in God. And, if necessary, reform your life.

Today's reading from Deuteronomy is one of the most important belief statements in the Old Testament. It describes God's initial call to Abraham and God's graciousness in delivering the Israelite people. They turned to God in their need, and God saved them from bondage in Egypt. The sacrifice they offered was one of thanksgiving for God's goodness, not one of reparation. The psalm also proclaims God's protection and assistance to those in need. There is no quid pro quo here, no "You do this and I'll do that." God's goodness is pure gift.

Saint Paul insists on the same point. He argues that it is not good works that save us, but faith or openness to God. He must have startled his audience when he declared that membership in the Jewish community gave one no advantage. This should startle us as well. It is not membership in the “right” religious group, but genuine faith that justifies us.

The Gospel recounts the temptations of Jesus. Many commentators maintain that these represent some of the prominent messianic expectations of his day. The people believed that the messiah would feed the hungry, or release the nation from the domination of others, or call on the extraordinary power of God to perform miracles. These were all admirable deeds in themselves; they still are today. Who would not want to see that the hungry are well fed, or that people are granted self-determination? Who would not want to demonstrate the marvelous power of God? But why are these good works presented here as temptations? Might it be that Jesus is challenged to perform them for the wrong reasons? Jesus is not to act as God, but as God’s Son. That’s the temptation for Jesus and for us: to be God, to do all the good, strong, powerful things on one’s own or as if it were all one’s own doing, rather than at God’s good pleasure. It seems that real temptation is often subtle, not obvious. And we, too, are frequently tempted to do good things, but for the wrong reasons or in inappropriate ways.

In the face of each temptation, Jesus reminds the tempter that the heart of righteousness is commitment to God and trust in God, not the performance of marvelous deeds. Jesus will indeed eventually feed the hungry, deliver the people from bondage and demonstrate the marvelous power of God. But he will accomplish these feats in God’s good time and in a manner that will please God, not the crowds. Jesus

eventually will trust God completely, and in that trust, God will work God’s will for life for everyone.

What do these readings tell us about Lent? They show no interest in what we can do for God, but in what God has already done for us. They call us, not to repent of our sins, but to open our hearts to God in faith. Even the account of Jesus’ temptations underplays the significance of great feats of devotion, and instead emphasizes the importance of fidelity to God’s promptings in life, the importance of trusting God. As one theologian writes: “Lenten self-examination that remains preoccupied with self, rather than with moving on to loving trust in God, comes dangerously close to a narcissistic idolatry of self.” He says, “We are called to trust the God who will deliver us from that bondage of preoccupation with self.”

This is not to say that penance is out of place during Lent. Quite the contrary. Still, whatever penances we take on would enable us to recommit ourselves to God, who has been so gracious to us. They would strengthen our faith and trust in God, and not reassure us that we have paid our debts.

They would open our eyes to the fact that God is indeed our refuge and our fortress, the one in whom we can trust for our salvation, as Jesus did. Our special joy is to remember the story of these acts and to confess that, “Jesus is Lord and believe in [our] heart that God raised him from the dead” (Romans 10:9). By the words of this confession, we are assured of God’s presence on our lips and in our heart. In such remembering, confessing, trusting and giving thanks, we will celebrate a joyous Lent.

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