

First Sunday of Lent
March 13, 2011

Let me lead into Lent by speaking of sin. More expressive than any catechism definition of sin is the Genesis story of the first man and woman. Sin goes back to the beginning of the human drama. Somewhere in the distant past, our first parents turned their backs on God. The way Genesis describes it, they ate from the tree of which God had commanded "You shall not eat of it."

Whether you see a red apple in Eden or some sort of symbol doesn't matter. What matters is how God's people came to understand sin. Sin was rebellion. From one's own sin to the world's sin, to sin is to rebel, to revolt, to disobey. Sin ruptures a relationship, intimacy with the God who created us out of love alone. The Gospels are no different. For John's Jesus, sin is separation from God. All this is what Luke's parable of the Prodigal Son portrays so powerfully. To sin is to break a bond.

Which brings me to my question: What has all this to do with Lent? It may help us to go back to St. Paul. Paul was profoundly aware that sin is almost a personal force. But it is more than Adam's act of disobedience. It is an evil force that tyrannizes every woman and man. It is a power hostile to God. Its works are sinful deeds. It is Sin with a capital S. But Paul was profoundly aware of a still more powerful reality. He proclaimed it to the Christians of Rome in today's second reading which continues: "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more... through Jesus Christ our Lord." Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Lent makes sense only because we relive a love that has no rival, the love that is more powerful than sin. Only God could possibly destroy sin. So what did God do? God sent His very own Son. And not simply *sent* His Son. His Son was born as we are. That alone would have been enough to break sin's power. But it was not enough for God. In the divine scenario, God's Son-in-flesh lived as we live, grew as we grow, ate as we eat, got tired and slept as we sleep, laughed our laughter and cried our tears. That would have been enough to break Satan's hold. But it was not enough for God. Unbelievably, God had determined to conquer sin on a cross.

Such is the love we relive in Lent. A God-person freely enduring a cruel crucifixion for a world that had sinned against him, was still sinning, would never quite stop sinning. St. Paul himself was amazed, found it hard to credit: “Why, one will hardly die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one will dare even to die. But God shows God’s love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” Christ died for us. During Lent, let’s lift our eyes to the love that led Jesus to the cross.

What should all this say to us today, in Lent and beyond? The answer is obvious: Don’t sin! But that’s abstract. How bring all this into our day-to-day living? Unexpectedly, one concrete answer leaps out of today’s Gospel. Like Israel, 40 years in the wilderness, Jesus, the new Israel, is tempted – tempted to betray his mission. You’re hungry? Well then, change these stones into bread! You want the people to pay attention to you? Soar like a bird from the top of the temple! You want to rule over the world? Just worship me and you’ve got it made!

No, Jesus responds, you’ve got it all wrong. Your way is not my way. It is not bread that gives life. It is my word. It is not by circus spectacles that I reveal myself. Look for me among the lowly, the powerless, the crucified. It is not by worldly power that my kingdom will come. The Kingdom of God is won by love. And that love, at its best, is a crucified love.

For the 40 days of Lent, then, and beyond, let a crucial Christian challenge characterize our daily living. Rather than setting our eyes on sin, why not shake loose the love in us, the love that is stronger than sin. I mean the kind of love that carried Christ to a cross. I mean a love that can turn the other cheek; a love that does not sulk until apology arrives on bended knee; a love that keeps marriage alive through stress and infidelity; a love that goes out to those who are different from us, goes out to the homeless and the hungry.

Such is the Lent that leads to Easter. In the wake of such love, sin runs a distant second – always a threat because we are woefully weak, but never a tyrant because in Christ we are strong. Let your Lent be large in loving. I promise you. It will take a lot of weight off you: the weight of sin and the weight of guilt.

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