

Friday (Oscar Romero)

Money is good, but selfish persons have made it bad and sinful. Power is good, but abuse by humans has made it something to fear. All has been created by God, but humans have subjected it to sin. And so Christ proclaims that the whole of creation will be redeemed in him, because he will give the meaning of all that God has created. The universe rejoices, money rejoices, power rejoices, all material things rejoice because the day will come when the Supreme Judge will redeem from sin, from slavery, from shame, all that God has created and that humans are using for sin, for affront against their fellows.

Scripture (Deuteronomy 6:10-13)

When Yahweh has brought you into the country which he swore to your ancestors he would give you, with great and prosperous cities you have not built, with houses full of good things you have not provided, with wells you have not dug, with vineyards and olive trees you have not planted, when you have eaten as much as you want, be careful you do not forget Yahweh who has brought you out of Egypt. Yahweh your God is the one you must fear, him alone you must serve, his is the name by which you must swear.

A group of us meet each week to discuss the readings. If you would like to read the notes, answering the questions:

Why did God say 'Don't touch the fruit of these trees?'

Was Eve's temptation to reach for something good or bad?

Jesus was led into the desert. Why?

Were the Temptations a reasonable option for Jesus to take as Messiah?

Could Jesus have failed by 'giving in' to the temptations?

please email me or visit sthelenscrosby.org.uk, click on 'prayer', then 'Thinking outside the pew'

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1st Week of Lent

Lent reminds us who we are

For many years, I read the account of Adam and Eve's Fall, (Gen 2:7-9; 3:1-7) as a test of obedience set by God: he chose a tree and then made a rule that they were not to eat it; when they did, they were punished. This understanding of Eve being tempted to eat an apple – a fruit which is harmless in itself. The fruit, however, is of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. To eat the fruit was to try to gain this knowledge, which would mean they would be able to decide for themselves what is good and evil. Only God, however, has this authority and wisdom: it is beyond us. The sin, then, is far more serious than failing a simple test: it is trying to act independently from the creator; humans wanted autonomy from God.

'Life' and 'Death' in the Old Testament are not restricted to the physical body. When God warned them that they would be doomed to die, he was not speaking as a judge passing a death sentence – they clearly survive the act of disobedience – but in the sense that to live outside the relationship with God would be a life of struggle and lead to returning to the dust from which they came, rather than growing into the full image and likeness of God. The first consequence of this damaged relationship is they become afraid of God and they discover shame, i.e. there is now disharmony between them where before there was complete harmony.

As St. Paul teaches, (Romans 5:12-19), because of sin, death entered the whole human race. This is evident throughout the Old Testament where the Israelites frequently disobey God. e.g. in the forty years in the desert where God is leading them to the Promised Land: they seek to be independent from God in seeking food when they disobey the rules on collecting manna; they test God, rather than putting their trust in him; and they deny God, abandoning him to worship false Gods.

Then, as St. Paul teaches, Jesus changes all of this by his obedience. As soon as he is baptised, he is driven by the Spirit to be tempted in the desert. The temptations he faces are to tempt Jesus to break the basic commandment: 'You must love God with all your heart, your soul and your mind'. In refusing to turn the stones into bread, Jesus will not seek food using his own powers – he will depend on God, (God will be at the heart of his life); in refusing to jump off the temple, he will not put God to the test, he will trust him, (he will not put him to the test, he will worship him with his soul); by refusing to worship the devil for earthly power, he will worship only God, (with his mind and his strength, he will not serve false gods.).

Jesus did not begin his public ministry with 'action plans' or manifestos, i.e. he did not start with his own ideas; instead he began in the emptiness of the desert where, in the Jewish understanding, evil spirits dwelt, and where, through prayer and fasting, he was acutely aware of his dependence on God.

Jesus' temptations are universal because he is beginning the new Israel, the new people of God. In obeying God completely, Jesus restores the relationship with God which is lost by disobedience.

Our Lenten observances of prayer and fasting (together) are not, (as I thought when I misunderstood the Fall and Original Sin), a way of impressing God or earning points with him: they are disciplines which allow us to remember our dependence on him and so to live in obedience, and to live fully

Martin Bennett

Monday (C.S.Lewis)

The moment you have a self at all, there is the possibility of putting yourself first – wanting to be the centre – wanting to be God, in fact. That was the sin that Satan taught the human race. He put into the heads of our remote ancestors the idea that they could ‘be like gods’ – could set up on their own as if they had created themselves – be their own masters – invent some sort of happiness for themselves outside God, apart from God. And out of that hopeless attempt has come nearly all that we call human history, the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy.

Scripture (1 Kings 8: 57-61)

May Yahweh our God be with us, as he was with our ancestors. May he turn our hearts towards him so that we may follow all his ways and keep the commandments and laws which he gave to our ancestors. May these words of mine be present with Yahweh day and night that he may uphold the cause of his servant as each day requires, so that all the peoples of the earth may come to know that Yahweh is God indeed and that there is no other. May your hearts be wholly with God, following his laws and keeping his commandments.

Tuesday (Carlo Carretto)

The love of God is by nature pure, balanced and holy. Whoever is dominated by it has an ordered view of things and knows the meaning of true freedom. But the love of God must be worked at, cultivated, pruned, fertilised. Above all, such love must be purified: it must be released from the fetters of the senses and from the pursuit of pleasure. In other words, it must be made free to grow in our hearts.

Scripture (Psalm 51:1-4,6,10-11)

Have mercy on me, O God, in your faithful love. In your great tenderness wipe away my offences; wash me thoroughly from my guilt, purify me from my guilt. For I am well aware of my offences, my sin is constantly in mind. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, I have done what you see to be wrong. You delight in sincerity of heart, and in secret you teach me wisdom. God, create in me a clean heart, renew within me a resolute spirit, do not thrust me away from your presence, do not take away from me your spirit of holiness.

Wednesday (Thomas a Kempis)

When our inner inclinations are corrupted, the actions that spring from them are also corrupted. And this is a sign of our lack of inner strength; for from a pure heart alone springs the fruit of a holy life. A person’s achievements are often discussed, but seldom the principles by which they live. We inquire if they are brave, handsome, rich, clever, a good writer, a hard worker: but whether they are humble minded, patient and gentle, devout and spiritual is seldom mentioned. Nature regards the outward characteristics of a person: Grace considers the inner disposition.

Scripture (1 Peter 4:10-11)

Each one of you has received a special grace, so, like good stewards responsible for all these varied graces of God, put it at the service of others. If anyone is a speaker, let it be as the words of God, if anyone serves, let it be as in strength granted by God; so that in everything God may receive the glory, through Jesus Christ, since to him alone belong all the glory and power for ever and ever.

Thursday (Thomas Merton)

No matter how little you may have learned of God in your prayer, compare your acts with that little, order them by that measure. Ultimately, the secret of all this is perfect abandonment to the will of God in the things you cannot control and perfect obedience to Him in everything that depends on your own volition so that in all things you desire only one thing, which is the fulfilment of His will.

Scripture (Romans 12:1-2)

I urge you then, remembering the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, dedicated and acceptable to God; that is the kind of worship for you, as sensible people. Do not model your behaviour on the contemporary world, but let the renewing of your minds transform you, so that you may discern for yourselves what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and mature.