Lectio Divina – 1st Sunday of Lent - Year A

Contexts

Matthew’s Gospel (in brief)

* Composed between 80-90 CE
* Author is anonymous, but named as ‘Matthew the tax collector’ by later tradition.
* Written in scholarly ‘synagogue’ Greek.
* Incorporates almost the entire Gospel of Mark, plus material from Q and material unique to Matthew.
* Structured around 5 major discourses (each ends with the phrase: “When Jesus had finished….”:
  + **Prologue – chapters 1- 4 Genealogy, Nativity & Infancy, Baptism, Temptation**
  + 1st: 5-7 Sermon on the Mount
  + 2nd: 10 Missionary Discourse
  + 3rd: 13 Parable Discourse
  + 4th: 18 Community Discourse
  + 5th: 23-25 Apocalyptic Judgement Discourses
* May be a parallel for the 5 books of the Pentateuch - Jesus the new Moses.
* Jesus first words are ‘to fulfil all righteousness’.
* A handbook for Church leaders to assist them in teaching and preaching, worship, mission and polemic.
* 2 broad categories: discourse & narrative.
* The only Gospel to explicitly mention the ‘Church’ – Matthew is theologian of the church.
* Initially addressed to a Jewish-Christian audience – only late in the Gospel is there openness to Gentiles.
* Names Jesus as ‘Messiah’ at the very beginning and throughout the Gospel.

Matthew 4:1-11: things to notice

* This episode comes between the Baptism of Jesus (3:13-17) and the beginning of his Galilean ministry (4:12-17).
* It begins with the image of the Spirit, which appears in the form of a dove at the Baptism, leads Jesus out into the wilderness (note: NOT the sandy desert!) to be tempted.
* Jesus fasts for 40 days – Matthew is connecting up the time spent in the wilderness by Moses (40 years) and Elijah (a long time). Matthew is always keen to show Jesus as the ‘new’ Moses. It is no accident that Moses and Elijah will appear in the Gospel of the Transfiguration next Sunday.
* 40 is Biblical code for ‘a long time’ or ‘a very long time’ – it does not mean forty 24 hour days, nor forty 365-day years.
* At his Baptism Jesus has been anointed Son of God (‘you are my beloved son’) and given the power and authority of God.
* Note the use of ‘if you are the Son of God’ in the first 2 temptations.
* The temptations are about whether Jesus will behave as Son of God or will he fail the test, just as God’s people did during their 40 year journey of distrust of God’s care for them, complaining and rebelling.
* Matthew shows, by contrast, that Jesus forges a new path for human beings. When faced with evil he remains true to himself and his identity, and true to God.
* What Jesus has done, we can too. Faced with evil, we can overcome it by staying true to our vocations as God’s beloved sons and daughters, placing our trust in God (rather than ourselves and our own power), being strengthened by the Word of God (both scriptures and the ultimate Word: Jesus) and not replacing God as the centre of our lives with glory, power and wealth for ourselves.
* Temptation 1: a hungry Jesus is tempted to feed himself (rather than trust in God) by turning stones into bread. Jesus replies that the Word of God is the chief nourishment for God’s sons and daughters.
* Temptation 2: Jesus is tempted to prove God’s care of him by a spectacular miracle – throw yourself off the parapet of the Temple. Jesus refuses to prove God’s care for him and replies, ‘You must not put the Lord, your God, to the test’.
* Temptation 3: Jesus is tempted to gain power and wealth by worshipping the Devil rather than God (putting evil in the place of God). Jesus replies that only God is worthy of our worship. Worshipping evil (also a symbol for material things) can gain us power and wealth, but replaces the presence of God in our lives. God is no longer the centre, we and our possessions, power and status are.
* Jesus is reversing the false choices which the people in the desert made.
* “The temptation of Jesus has universal significance: (a) Jesus stands for Israel because he is the beginning of the new people of God, the founder of a new humanity; (b) the basic temptations is not to love God with a unified heart, at the risk of life, at the cost of wealth and power. Jesus is shown as the perfect lover of God” (NJBC)
* Finally, when the devil is dismissed, the angels come and look after Jesus – God fulfils the promise of care for Jesus. Jesus shows himself at all times to be in right relationship with God and with his neighbours.

The Liturgical Context – why does the church choose this passage to reflect on this Sunday?

The Sunday Lenten Gospels

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|  | First Reading | Second Reading | Gospel |
| **1st Sunday** | **Genesis 2:7-9, 3:1-7**  **Creation & Fall** | **Romans 5:12-19**  **Sin and Grace** | **Mt 4:1-11**  **Temptations** |
| 2nd Sunday | Genesis 12:1-4  The call of Abraham | 2 Timothy 1:8-10  Our call to holiness | Mt 17:1-9  Transfiguration |
| 3rd Sunday | Exodus 17:3-7  Israel’s water of despair | Romans 5:1-2, 5-8  God’s love poured into us | John 4:5-42  Samaritan Woman  [Living Water] |
| 4th Sunday | 1 Samuel 16:1,6-7,10-13  Anointing of David | Ephesians 5:8-14  Children of the Light | John 9:1-41  Man born blind  [From darkness to Light] |
| 5th Sunday | Ezekiel 37:12-14  I will put my spirit in you | Romans 8:8-11  The Spirit dwells in you | John 11:1-45  Raising of Lazarus  [from death to Life] |
| Passion | Isaiah 50:4-7  I did not cover my face against insult | Philippians 2:6-11  He humbled himself and God raised him up | Matthew 26:14-27:66  Passion |
| Easter | Acts 10:34, 37-43  We ate and drank with him | Colossians 3:1-4  Look for the things that are above | John 20:1-9  Jesus risen from the dead |

As always, the first reading provides an introduction for the Gospel text. It is a story of temptation and sin. The temptation is to ‘be like God’.

Below are 3 reflections on the Gospel which bring together the text and its use for the First Sunday of Lent.

Bishop David Walker

The temptations were three. They all speak of power, power over nature, power over other people and power over God.

Satan tempted Jesus to change stones into bread. We are tempted to waste the limited resources of our planet, to take more than our daily bread. Jesus reminds us that we don’t live by bread alone. That it is in sharing what we have, sharing our daily bread that we truly live.

Satan tempted Jesus to rule the nations. In our relationships at work, home, school, life we are tempted to have others do what we want, to rule them. Jesus reminds us we are to serve God by serving each other, not seeking to dominate each other.

Satan tempted Jesus to jump from the Temple and so test God. We are tempted to bargain with God. If you, God, do what I want, I will worship you. We try to manage God, thinking if we live a good life then we deserve to be rewarded by God. We can’t earn God’s love.

Thankfully we can’t lose it either. Jesus reminds us that God loves us because God loves us and for no other reason.

As we follow the example of Jesus by sharing what we have, by serving others not enslaving them, by following God’s will not ours, we walk with the New Adam in right relationship with God. We remember that we are dust and that it is God who breathes life into our souls. [Bishop David Walker]

David Hofman, OCarm.

Our great Lenten journey has begun! It’s a journey which begins in ash and ends in water. Fire is a profound part of our national experience. We know its power to destroy, blacken and reduce to ash. We know that evil can do the same - destroy our wholeness of spirit, blacken our lives and reduce the beauty of human life to so much ash.

We begin Lent in the ash of acknowledging our own part in harbouring, creating and doing evil - those places in our hearts where the fire of anger, bitterness, selfishness or narrowness of

mind and heart has left nothing but smouldering ash.

The ash is a reminder that our true life is not found in mortal things which eventually turn to dust, but in eternal things. We also know that out of ash new life can bud, grow strong, bloom into fullness - that’s the Easter miracle.

As always, the Gospels of the first two Sundays in Lent provide a road map for our Lenten journey from temptation (this Sunday) to transfiguration (next Sunday).

Prayer, fasting and almsgiving are our companions on this journey. We fast not only from food, but from everything that prevents us from entering more deeply into prayerful communion with God who gently draws us away from evil. We allow ourselves to be tempted out of the ash of selfishness and narrowness of heart and into a life of open hearted goodness.

We celebrate God’s graciousness to us by sharing what we have with those in need whether it be food, wealth, time, love, friendship or compassion. That’s what it means to ‘repent and believe the Good News’.

In these days when we are so conscious of the impact of human life on God’s creation, perhaps we could think about some permanent fasting from our excessive consumption of power, food and petrol in order to allow our earth to heal, to breathe and to continue to be a source of nourishment and life for the whole human family. [David Hofman, OCarm.]

Mark O’Brien, OP

In typical storytelling fashion, there are three temptations (three examples) that provide a ‘torah’ or instruction for readers. The first clearly echoes the Garden Story with its temptation to transcend the human condition on one's own terms, to 'turn these stones into loaves'. Jesus' response to each temptation is to quote a passage from the Torah (Deuteronomy) and to act in accord with it. In relation to the first temptation his response is to act only in accordance with God's will. The text's claim is that the words God has spoken in the Bible provide enough for us to decide what God's will is in our lives. We decide what God's will is because that is what God wants us to do: to listen to the Word and make an honest response. It is part of our dignity as God's children.

The second temptation attempts to get 'under' Jesus' reliance on God's word by targeting the trust on which it is based. The temptation to have experiential 'proof' that God cares and looks after us can be acute at times but its outcome, like the outcome of the failure of trust in the Garden story, is destructive. If a spouse continually seeks proof of the other's love, the relationship is likely to collapse under the pressure. How can you demand proof of love unless you first define what you mean by it, in which case you have taken control of the other person and demeaned and enslaved him or her? Jesus will not put God to the proof. The final temptation raises the question of an alternative to one's relationship with God. Can anything in this world justify such a move? The biblical answer is a resounding no! Because of its conviction that no other relationships are really possible without a relationship to God. It forms the basis of all others and is the base on which God wants to build a rich human life.

As in the 'Garden Story: God comes looking for us as we hide in the garden, trying to escape-such is our distorted perception of God and ourselves. God not only wants to free us from our affliction and enslavement but to enrich us in a way that makes all the wealth of the world pale into insignificance. The reading from Romans underscores the difference via a series of statements 'if it is certain that ... it is even more certain that… ‘ Seduced by the serpent, Eve and Adam saw God as mean, withholding what was their ‘right’. In contrast Paul, who has been freed from his own enslavement by the grace of Christ, writes of the abundant gifts that God desires to shower on us. We need to face our sinfulness honestly and Lent is a season for this, but we also need-perhaps even more-to see it is a season in which our generous God seeks us out, bearing abundant gifts even though we do not deserve them. [Mark O’Brien OP]