

## First Sunday of Lent—Year C

An effective way to know what Jesus' favourite Old Testament was is to see which O.T. book did he quote most frequently. Jesus quoted the Psalms most frequently, but the second most quoted book was Deuteronomy. Sequentially, Deuteronomy is the fifth book of the Bible, and is the fifth and last books known as the collectively as the *Books of the Law* or the *Books of Moses*, so-called because Moses is acknowledged to be the author of these books.

Deuteronomy consists of a series of sermons presented by Moses to the Israelites before they proceed into the promised land after having journeyed through the wilderness for forty years. If one looks at a map of the Middle East, it seems that the Israelite journey to the promised land should not have taken more than a few weeks at most. Early on, however, the Israelites refused to enter the promised land because they were afraid of the inhabitants there, as related in the Book of Numbers, chapter 14. God, angered by their lack of faith, told them through Moses that everyone over the age of twenty would die in the wilderness. Only their descendants would, after a period of forty years, enter the promised land. After forty years, a time period needed to get something important done, the Israelites would enter the promised land, having been made a new people through the wilderness experience, both figuratively and literally. The forty years was needed for the Israelites to be formed, shaped and forged into being God's authentic people.

The failure to be ready to enter the promised land early on during the journey was compounded by other failures. The Israelites constantly complained against Moses, and gave into idolatry, worshipping the golden calf while Moses was conversing with God on Mount Sinai. Moses too showed a lack of faith when he struck the rock at Meribah and Massah twice to obtain water there when God told him to strike the rock only once. The sojourn through the desert was not without its failures, sins, disappointments and demonstrated lack of faith.

The Book of Deuteronomy is a series of instructions given by Moses to the Israelites, reminding them to behave as God's holy people. They stand at the east side of the Jordan river, ready to cross it as they proceed into the promised land. Moses' own lack of faith at Meribah and Massah came at a high price, however. God told him that he would not go with the Israelites but would die and be buried

on the east side of the Jordan. Joshua would take up his role as leader of the Israelites, leading them into the promised land.

In the instruction found in the First Reading, Moses reminds the Israelites of their humble beginnings. The sons of the patriarch Jacob—Joseph and his brothers—enjoyed prosperity in Egypt until they were later enslaved by the Egyptians. The Lord heard their cry for liberation and brought them out of Egypt with powerful works of “signs and wonders”. Moses reminds them, despite their fear, lack of faith and idolatry, that God has brought them to this land, where they will be his covenanted people. The Exodus experience has for Jews a meaning like what the death and resurrection of Jesus has for Christians. Both are mighty acts of God, resulting in liberation. Both require a confession of faith, through which these mighty acts are recited. For Christians, this is found in the Apostles of Nicene Creeds, but for both Christians and Jews alike, a confession of faith can be found in the Responsorial Psalm, where the following line can be found: “Say to the Lord my refuge and my fortress: My God, in whom I trust”.

Moving on to the Gospel, Jesus, immediately after his baptism and before the start of his public ministry, goes into the wilderness. When you first hear the word *wilderness*, expunge from your mind a Canadian wilderness like that which surrounds us like here in Whistler, with mountains, trees, rivers and lakes. Wilderness means desert, consisting of Hard, rock-dry ground with no plants, trees or water.

Archbishop-emeritus Adam Exner, the former Archbishop of Vancouver, related, in a talk he gave many years ago, his experience of going to the Holy Land. A tour guide took both the Archbishop and a pilgrimage group into the wilderness where they could experience for themselves what Jesus and many prophets and hermits experienced in the wilderness. Archbishop Exner said that the experience was eerie because he could not hear a thing, not even the sound of a breeze. The desert wilderness was entered so that one’s eyes, ears, heart and mind could be opened, so that one was ready to hear the voice and will of God.

Jesus certainly went into the desert to commune with God his Father, but he went there for other reasons too. Jesus went into the desert to 40 days on behalf of others. Firstly, he goes on behalf of Adam. The title “Son of God” applies not only to Jesus, but to Adam also. The Genealogy found in St. Luke’s Gospel is somewhat different to that found in the Gospel of St. Matthew. Unlike Matthew’s Genealogy,

St. Luke's goes backwards in time, beginning with Jesus, then concluding with Adam. Because Adam had no natural parents, he is described as "Adam, Son of God". He is the origin of our humanity, and, because he succumbs to the temptation in the garden, he is also the origin of our fallen humanity. Because of his fall, his sin, humanity stands in need of salvation. God the Father will inaugurate his plan of salvation, with his Son Christ Jesus, the new Son of God.

Jesus is also in the wilderness for 40 days on behalf of the Israelite nation. During the forty year, the Israelites complained, lost faith, gave into idolatry and succumbed to fear. They did not come to the promised land unscathed. Most of them were born during the journey, as most of those who had started in Egypt had died in the wilderness. Jesus goes into the wilderness on behalf of Adam, on behalf of the Israelites and on behalf of us to set things right. Where we fail, he will overcome our failures. He does this through rejecting the temptations the devil sets before him.

One must first understand that Jesus is not play-acting here. He is truly being tempted. He shares in the fullness of our humanity, including free will, and is therefore free to accept the temptations or reject them.

Another thing to understand is that the devil or Satan (the accuser or slanderer) is a true spiritual creature. In an audience given by St. Pope Paul VI many years ago, he reminded his audience that refusing to acknowledge his existence or explain him away as a "pseudo-reality, a conceptual, fanciful personification of the unknown causes of our misfortunes" rejects both the evidence in scripture and Church teaching. Jesus is being tempted by a true being, a fallen angel, and not a projection of his imagination.

The temptations set before Jesus are well known to us. We recognize them because we have encountered them ourselves many times. We have also at times overcome them or been overcome by them.

In the first temptation, the changing of a stone into bread, the devil is inviting Jesus to indulge his desires, especially his desire for food, given his 40 day fast. We have many needs that are good in nature. The problem is when they are idolized or made the central focus or fixation of our life. This can show itself in obesity, addiction, lust and greed. The result can be boredom, a significant issue in many people's lives.

Jesus rebukes this temptation by reminding the devil that “One does not live by bread alone”, a quote taken from Deuteronomy 8:3 (“He [fed] you with Manna, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone”). There are more important things than creature comforts.

In the second temptation, the Devil promises to give to Jesus authority over all nations, with their power and treasure. While we may not be able to attain sovereignty over nations, this temptation can also address our desire for popularity. We may be tempted to give up our values, our consciences, to advance our careers to impress others, in order to be loved and accepted by others.

Jesus responds by quoting Deuteronomy 6:13, reminding the devil that “Worship the Lord your God and serve only him, which is found in Deuteronomy 6:13. One rejects this temptation by fearing the Lord, meaning to fear offending God above all else. Msgr. Charles Pope, a priest and blogger from the Archdiocese of Washington D.C., put it this way: “If I can knell before God, I can stand before any man. If God is the only one we need to please, then we don’t need to run around trying to please anyone else”.

In the third temptation, the devil tries to tempt Jesus to test God the Father’s love for him by throwing himself the highest wall of the Temple mount. The devil even quotes Psalm 91, out of context, to make his case. The temptation reflects presumption and ultimately pride. This temptation presumes that God can be shaped and formed into our preferred image of him. We tie him around our finger and make him do our bidding. We re-fashion God and make this false God the object of our worship. This is at the heart of Adam’s sin in the garden. Taking of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was an attempt to usurp God’s authority, to make oneself God. Adam gave into this temptation, but Jesus on our behalf rejects it.

Jesus again quotes the Book of Deuteronomy in his rejection of this third temptation by reminding the devil to not “put the Lord your God to the test” (Deut. 6:16). This third temptation is overcome when we allow God to be God, to embrace the wisdom I read on a poster that was pinned to the kitchen door of a restaurant in Kamloops. The poster read “There are two rules to living a happy and contented life. The first rule is: There is a God. The second rule is: you are not him”.