

## 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent “A Time for Spiritual Quarantine”

Fr. Frank Schuster

Lent is starting out in a very surreal way this year. Many of us have one eye on entering into this holy season like we do every year and another eye on the news, wondering about issues like the coronavirus, and whatever other problems our country and world faces. And while it is good to always be aware of what is happening around us, to have our preparations in place in case they become necessary, the Church nevertheless invites us each year to leave the world behind so to follow Jesus into the desert, a place where we get away from the crowd and get away from the noise so to enter a period of purification and enlightenment. In today’s day and age of constant information, this is very difficult to do but nevertheless important for our spiritual growth. I don’t know about you, but I have found that it is also important to turn off our phones and news feeds every so often just to give our souls a break. And here is a fun fact, since we are hearing the word “quarantine” over and over in the news, it was interesting to find out that the etymology of the word “quarantine” can actually be seen as coming from an older Italian dialect meaning “Forty Days”! This was back in the days when ships would be put into holding for about forty days before being allowed into European ports. When I realized that this past week I couldn’t help but think that the season of Lent could be seen as a kind of quarantine, a spiritual quarantine, where we follow Jesus into the isolation of the desert for forty days for a period of purification and enlightenment.

The Church this year gives us very provocative readings to help us begin this spiritual pilgrimage. I am particularly struck by the juxtaposition of the first reading and the Gospel reading. Both readings talk about temptation. Adam and Eve are tempted by the serpent. Jesus is tempted by the devil. Adam and Eve succumb to the temptation and become distanced from God. Jesus triumphs over his period of temptation and the suggestion seems to be that we can too if we are united with Jesus in our times of struggle and doubt. And so, where did Adam and Eve go wrong during their time of temptation and what went right in the Gospel reading with Jesus’ time of temptation?

The story from Genesis speaks of our human tendency to turn away from God and his commandments out of a false sense of freedom. The forbidden fruit looks good enough to me so why not take it against God’s will? I am free to do that. And ironically, that expression of the so called freedom we have of refusing God’s will in our life actually becomes the very thing that enslaves us because notice how later in that chapter of Genesis Adam and Eve find themselves hiding from God as a result. In the temptation in the desert, the devil also offers Jesus one reasonable temptation after the other under the guise of so called freedom. You are hungry Jesus, you have the freedom to turn this rock into bread, why not? You have the freedom to be saved from any harm that can befall you, why wouldn’t you exercise your freedom in that way? The devil even suggests that Jesus can have the whole world kneel to him if he just knelt to the devil. Sounds like a Faustian bargain to me.

Jesus sees through it all, doesn't he? You see, Jesus understood that feeding his belly with whatever he wants isn't what makes him free. Being able to deny himself and detach himself from worldly delights is what makes him really free because he is not enslaved or addicted to any possession or earthly sensation. Jesus also understood that using his freedom to keep him always from harm is actually very enslaving because now we are living in fear all the time. Jesus prefers to trust his heavenly Father in all things instead which is why he won't test him. Because Jesus simply trusts his heavenly Father's will in all things, he is truly free. He is not enslaved to whatever fear he might have for his future. And the devil shows his cards when he says Jesus can have the whole world if he prostrates before him because the act of kneeling before the devil is the very definition of enslavement. This is when Jesus exposes the devil for who he is, be gone Satan, only the Lord my God shall I worship. Only the Lord my God shall I serve.

And so, even though this season of Lent is starting off in a very surreal way compared to other years, we are nevertheless given good medicine by our Gospel reading. As we enter into our spiritual "quarantine", our forty days of purification and enlightenment, we can begin by an examination of conscience of all the ways we put our attachments to sensual pleasures like eating, drinking, sex, whatever, before our relationship with God. This was something Bishop Barron was talking about this week in the book we gave parishioners this year. He suggested that unless we allow ourselves to be hungry from time to time of earthly pleasures, we won't fully experience the depth of the ultimate hunger we all have in our hearts; namely, our hunger for God. We can also ask ourselves, what are all the ways I put my fears or expectations of the future ahead of my relationship with God? Fr. Benedict Groeschel liked to describe this with what he called "the Big Lie". You remember the Big Lie right? The Big Lie people buy into is the idea that if I go to Church every Sunday, say my prayers each day, and do everything I am supposed to do as a Christian, nothing bad will ever happen to me and my kids won't get acne. Remember that? It is the Big Lie because Jesus tells us that to be his disciple we must be willing to pick up our cross and follow him. And so we can ask ourselves, do we really trust God when life is good or when life gets tough do we live our lives in fear of the future? And finally, we can ask ourselves in what ways do we prostrate to the powers of this world allowing popular culture to dictate what we believe, say and do? Do we love God with our whole heart? Do we truly serve the Lord alone...or is it only when it is most convenient and acceptable to the culture in which we live? The question is: who are we really kneeling to anyway, right? These are powerful questions to pray about as we begin our forty days of the season of Lent, our yearly spiritual quarantine. My friends, I sincerely wonder if we enter into this season with whole heart, how much more spiritually healthy we will all be when Easter comes around?