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4/5 March 2006

The First Sunday of Lent (B)

The sacred season of Lent "has a double character, namely, to prepare both catechumens [those who learn the Christian faith and are preparing for baptism] and the baptized faithful to celebrate the paschal mystery" (*Ceremoniale Episcoporum*, 249). The Paschal Mystery is nothing less than the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The focus of this Lenten season is, then, to prepare each of us to share fully in the Death and Resurrection of Christ the Lord.

We who have been baptized first shared in the Paschal Mystery of Christ the very moment we were baptized into the Church, the Body of Christ. St. Paul asks of us:

... are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life. For if we have grown into union with him through a death like his, we shall also be united with him in the resurrection. (Romans 6:3-5).

Indeed, as we entered into the waters of baptism - or as the water was poured over our head - we entered into the tomb of Christ having shared in his death. When we arose from the waters - or when the water ceased to be poured over us - we came forth as from a womb, sharing in the new life of Christ Jesus. In Baptism, we have shared fully in the Death and Resurrection

of Christ, in the Paschal Mystery. Those who are to be baptized at the sacred Vigil of Easter are also called by him to share in this Mystery; they, too, are called to die and to rise with Christ. Together we journey and prepare for this great day, even if there are no catechumens physically present among us.

With Jesus, then, who, after his baptism by John in the River Jordan, entered into the desert, we, too, enter into the desert of Lent. Indeed, even as "the Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert, and he remained in the desert for forty days," so, too, are we driven out into the desert by the same Spirit where we will remain for forty days so that we might "return to the Lord" as we were called to do on Ash Wednesday (Mark 1:12; Joel 2:13).

Jesus is led into the desert, into the land of death where he lived "among wild beasts," (Mark 1:13). But just what are these wild beasts? Scorpions and cobras and other creatures of the desert? Perhaps, but I suggest that these beasts are more than things of the earth, for why would the angels minister to Jesus simply for living among the animals?

Rather, these beasts are the various temptations that each of us face each day of our lives. We know that "we do not have a great high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). These wild beasts are the same

beasts with which we contend in the desert of Lent. They are the same sins we face each day and now combat with increased prayer, with fasting, and with almsgiving, whether they be pride, greed, envy, gluttony, lust, laziness, or any other sin which we commit. Jesus wrestled with each of these beasts in the desert and he conquered each one of them and gave rise to the life-giving water of which he said, "the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14). "So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help" (Hebrews 4:16). Let us beg of the Lord the grace to valiantly fight against our sins to throw off the yoke of Satan which keeps us from fully following after the Lord.

As Jesus conquered each of our sins he demonstrated his great willingness and desire to share fully in our humanity. When he took on flesh and was born of the Virgin Mary, he did not abandon his divinity but fully accepted our human frailties. Jesus not only unites himself with us in the desert as he did at his baptism, but he undergoes the very same aspects of human life which we seek to avoid here in the desert. He came to us as we are to call us to himself and to reform our lives. As Peter reminds us today, "For Christ also suffered for sins once, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might lead you to God" (I Peter 3:18).

As the angels ministered to him in the desert - just as they had ministered to the people of Israel in the desert and to Elijah - Jesus prepared for what he knew would come from his time in the desert. He knew that the desert prepared him for his mission, for when he emerged from the land of death, he boldly proclaimed, "This is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at hand! Reform your lives and believe in the Good News!" (Mark 1:15).

This same message was preached to the people of Noah's day and none but Noah and his family heeded the message. The waters of the flood destroyed all that was, all except for that which was on the ark. Through the waters of the flood the earth was re-created, even as we were re-created in the waters of baptism. We know well what Peter reminds us of today, that the waters of the flood "prefigured baptism, which saves [us] now" (I Peter 3:21).

When Noah and his family emerged from the ark, the Lord God placed the rainbow "in the clouds to serve as a sign of the covenant between [the Lord] and the earth" (Genesis 9:). Even as he set his bow in the heavens as a sign of his mercy given to Noah, so the Lord now sets before us the Cross of Christ as the sign of his grace and mercy to us and to all. Through the Cross, the Lord Jesus "shows sinners the way. He guides the

humble to justice, and he teaches the humble his way" (Psalm 25:9).

Before we enter into the great joy of Easter, we know that we must pass first through the pain and sorrow of Good Friday; we must first embrace the Cross of our salvation. Today, let us embrace the Cross of our Lord! Let us take up the wood of the Cross and beat back the demons and with it's power conquer our sins and be united with Christ the Lord. Let us again renounce the Evil One and seek to follow Christ in all things, that we might share in the glory of his Resurrection, for "this is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel!"