

Lent 1
2/21/2021

REMAINING FAITHFUL TO THE COVENANT

God enters into a covenant with Noah. That leads us to a question. What's a covenant? A covenant is a sacred and permanent relationship. It's helpful to contrast a covenant with a contract. A contract is something legal, specific and contains provisions for its own dissolution. By contrast, a covenant is based more on love than law, it's broad and in one sense, it may be violated but not dissolved.

The Old Testament reveals a number of covenants between God and his people, as we see today with Noah. This will happen later with Abraham and then Moses with the people on Mount Sinai. Still later, there is a covenant with David and in time, the Prophets saw covenants as a type of marriage. The Sacrament of Marriage is a covenant which is one reason why the Church cares so much about marriage. Our psalm today tells us, *Your ways O Lord, are love and truth to those who keep your covenant.*

Jesus, through his death and resurrection, initiated what we hear at every Mass as, *the new and everlasting covenant.* By our baptism we enter into a sacred relationship with God. With each celebration of Mass, this sacred relationship with God is renewed. The First Letter of Peter is considered to be a post baptismal instruction. Today we hear St. Peter likening baptism to the experience of Noah. He also links it to the resurrection and thus to the death of Jesus. In baptism, we share in the dying and rising of Jesus and at Easter, we renew our baptismal promises.

Being in a relationship whether it be with God, a spouse or others requires effort and work. Biblically, justice means being in right relationship. If it's possible to be in right relationship, it's possible to be drawn into a bad relationship. That possibility we call temptation.

The Gospel shows us Jesus in the desert for forty days where he's tempted by Satan. This all forms part of the basis for our season of Lent and every year on this First Sunday of Lent we hear of Jesus' being tempted.

A temptation tries to lead us into wrong relationship, with God, with others and even with ourselves. Pope Benedict once remarked, *At the heart of all temptations is the act of pushing God aside because we see him as secondary, superfluous and annoying.* Secondary, superfluous and annoying. And there are many temptations we can face, both large and small. It's important to combat them both because large sins seriously impair our covenant relationship and smaller sins can lead us more and more to sin and dispose us to larger sins. While there can be any number of temptations we can face, there are three I'd like to reflect on today.

One is *the temptation to mediocrity*, to just get by. Here people can work to be good enough to stay out of any big trouble but not committed enough to faith to let it inconvenience or challenge them too much. Mediocrity wants to do the minimal and fly just under the radar. Jesus calls us to many things, but he doesn't call us to be mediocre. He calls us to live lives of intentional faith, living hope and active charity in every little way.

There's *the temptation to look the other way in the face of evil*; to act as if everything is all right when it's not. We can say, *It's not that big a deal*, or *Everyone else is doing it*, or, *This is 2021*. We might say, *That's not my problem*. This temptation accustoms us to evil and sin which then leads us more deeply into evil and sin.

There's a *third temptation and that's to dehumanize others*, particularly those we don't like. It's been said that one of the first rules of war is to dehumanize your enemies. If they are of different nationalities or ethnic groups, there are a number of unflattering names you can call them. If they are of different political persuasions you may start to call them names like, "Socialists" or "Fascists" or even "Communists" or "Nazis." If your enemy is the unborn, you deny their humanity referring to them as "a clump of cells" or "the product of conception." And the list goes on. This temptation to dehumanize others often is rooted in anger and what we say or do in anger we usually regret. And at the root of anger there's fear.

And yet the flip side of every temptation is an invitation. The temptation to be mediocre is an invitation to excellence. The temptation to ignore is an invitation to do something. The temptation to dehumanize others is an invitation to see the dignity of every human person made in the image and likeness of God.

And not only that, we have tools to help us be strong against temptations. We have the example of Jesus and his presence in the Sacraments. When we've given into temptation, and at one time or another we all have, the Sacrament of Reconciliation lifts us up with the power of God's mercy which is stronger than sin. Here in the Eucharist, Jesus nourishes us with his Body and Blood under the form of bread and wine. We have the Word of God and the teachings of the Church to guide us. We have the gift of prayer as well as the example and intercession of the saints. We have each other to support, help and challenge one another as we journey to God together.

To live the Christian life means being in a permanent and sacred relationship with God. In our baptism, we share in Jesus' dying and rising, his Paschal Mystery and we enter into relationship with the Blessed Trinity. The rest of ourselves we are called to grow in that relationship which is renewed at every celebration of the Eucharist. And yet we know there are many temptations that lead us away from that relationship with God and others including the temptation to mediocrity, to look the other way and to dehumanize others. We face these temptations with the tools God gives us and we move forward in our covenant relationship with God this season of Lent, and always.