

1st Sunday in Lent (A) – Homily by Fr. Peter Clark

It's Lent. Our prayer, fasting and alms-giving, setting aside the clutter in our lives are designed to free us to become honest with ourselves and before God. What is my first love? Toward what is my life oriented? Where is my treasure?

Jesus summarized the duty of man in two phrases: *Love God* and *love thy neighbor as thyself*. But love expresses itself in acts, and our Lord has given us detailed rules on how that love happens and how to avoid degrading and selfish actions contrary to those loves.

We heard today of our ancestors Adam and Eve in the garden. They were given every good thing for their happiness, and friendship with God, provided they did not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Having been created in the image and likeness of God, they had both an intellect (reason) and will (the capacity to love).

These gifts are a shadow of God's own unlimited intellect and loving will that make us different from all the other animals. We show our love and faithfulness toward God our creator by obeying his commandments and growing in the same love he has shown us.

Adam and Eve, graced, with the capacity to love and choose, allowed them selves to be deceived by the serpent. *Did God really tell you not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?* The Evil One spoke the great lie and sowed the seeds of doubt and mistrust in God's loving care for them. *You will certainly not die. No. God knows well that the moment you eat of [the forbidden fruit] your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know what is good and what is evil.*

As Catholics, most of us know the law of right action. But knowledge is not enough. A man may know and yet disobey. Like Adam we may decide not to believe God but come up with our own moral standard, and think God's law doesn't apply to us.

Such disobedience is sin. Sin is, quite simply, breaking God's law. In that lies an enormity. The breach of God's law may be a small thing or a great. It may be a failing in a comparative trifle, that blurs our path and weakens our soul, a venial sin; or it may be definite rejection of

God, a mortal or grave sin. Without repentance before death the mortal sin leads to eternal damnation.

The enormity of sin lies in the breaking of God's law, acting in clear opposition to our natures, the way we were created to be and interact with each other. It's a blank ingratitude to God; to whom all men and women owe so much – especially we Catholics who have received such favor from the Lord.

It's incredibly stupid, this rebellion from God, for we are totally in the hands of God who keeps us in existence and desires only the best for us. The laws of God are not like a garden fence that limits us, preventing us from sampling the rich possibilities outside of its boundaries. My development is NOT being checked by God's laws.

God's laws are not mere whims of some stupid despot. [Comedian Woody Allen eg.] The laws of God are, on the contrary, the expression by God of his own complete knowledge of our nature and purpose. He knows what kind of being we are because he made us, knows our destiny, and only has our welfare in mind.

The man who makes an engine is not limiting your freedom if he tells you not to run it beyond a certain speed. Traveling outside the bounds of the purpose and specifications of the engine will destroy it. It becomes useless and is discarded. Rather the engineer who created it knows its boundaries and how it can efficiently realize its purpose.

Adam disregarded the "maker's instructions," directions for the right use of ourselves; intended for our benefit. Gosh, that fruit was pleasing to the eye, good for food. But that disobedience led to a fall from grace, hard labor, pain in childbirth, distorted human relations and eventually, death: a curse we share as his offspring.

Choosing to sin can seem reasonable because we choose what appears to be good. Like Adam we have the tendency to choose the more immediate good, often denying the bleak consequences.

If a married man develops an infatuation with a woman who is not his wife, then two mutually exclusive courses of action will seem to him, from different angles, good. To remain faithful to his wife will seem

good for many reasons and particularly because God has forbidden adultery. To be unfaithful to her will seem good because his lower nature will find transient pleasure in the sin. Again, the will must choose.

And remember that temptation is not a sin. But the sooner we reject it and avoid the lower pleasure, the better. But to give in to sin is an offense against God and contrary to one's own nature.

The resistance to sin often involves some sort of suffering. And one deadly way to lessen or avoid the suffering is to relax the moral law. Such laxity and shortcuts are deadly leading us to misery even faster.

Salvation history in the Bible provides many stories about our purpose, repentance and avoiding sin. The greatest lesson comes through the Father's intervention with his own Son, who left his glory in heaven, to humble himself, take on our weak flesh, and show us how to live.

St. Paul describes Jesus as the new Adam who got it right. During his temptation in the desert he recognized Satan's deception and distortion of Scripture. He rejected the way of selfishness and our lower nature but choosing obedience to and love of his Father. *Get away, Satan. It is written: The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him only shall you serve.*

This Lenten season we want to know better and make a firmer connection with this Jesus, who defeated sin and death and shows us the way to eternal life. In Christ we can repent of our sin, humble ourselves and grow to repeatedly recognize and choose the higher good in the midst of our temptations.

This way of obedience is not limiting or constricting but brings us freedom to love God and love our neighbor. We can grow into our true destiny and purpose, bearing abundant good fruit that will last forever. Our Lenten prayers, fasting and alms-giving will lead to a resurrection unto eternal life, our true destiny.