HOMILY FOR 1ST SUNDAY OF LENT YEAR A – 1st March 2020

Genesis 2:7-9, 3:1-7; Ps 50(51):3-6, 12-14, 17; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

When Jesus was baptised, His Father in Heaven affirmed Him in the Divine Love which is the Holy Spirit. The voice of the Father said to Him: “You are My Beloved Son, I am delighted in You” (Luke 3:22). And Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, was led into the wilderness to fast and to pray, and for 40 days He was tempted by the devil. As we enter into the 40 days of Lent, in preparation for the celebration of Easter, the Church invites us also to a time of prayer and fasting and giving help to others. We may wish that things were easier for us, but the truth is, we are in a battle against the forces of evil: the devil, the world and the flesh. In these days, we too are tempted, and like Christ, on whose ever-present help we depend, we too can be victorious. But we have to fight. Hear what St Peter tells us in chapter 5 of his first letter – stand up to the devil:

“Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that in due time he may exalt you. Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you. Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of your brothers and sisters throughout the world” (1 Peter 5:6-9).

So, like it or not, we are in a battle – the great battle between good and evil. We know that Jesus Christ has won the decisive victory over evil on the Cross, but we often struggle to make His victory the foundation of our lives. Like Christ Himself, we too are subject to temptations. Lent is a time of grace – a call from God to go to Him and renew our strength for this battle. For many of us today, our greatest temptations are to doubt. Losing some of our faith and trust in God, we can be tempted to give up the struggle and become complacent.

Firstly, we are tempted to doubt the power of Christ to change us. We cling to shades of gloom preferring the comfort of our own brokenness to the Gospel's call to conversion. Pope Francis warns us about this mentality which is "a sadness that stifles every effort at change and conversion by sowing resentment and hostility. That is no way to live a dignified and fulfilled life" he says. "It is not God's will for us, nor is it the life of the Spirit, which has its source in the heart of the risen Christ."

This self-centered gloom, which the monks of old called 'acedia,' can be overcome by thankfully and joyfully taking on the ascetical practices of lent – prayer, fasting and almsgiving. These help us to turn back to Jesus and trust Him. They are practical ways to repent and believe the Good News. Jesus wants to rouse our souls and He will if we turn to Him. As St Paul says "Awake, O Sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light" (Eph 5:14).

The second great temptation of our time is for us to doubt the power of the Church. We doubt that the Church can be a witness to the healing and saving power of the Gospel when so many of its leaders are embroiled in financial and sexual scandals, and so many of its members are so apathetic.

What St Paul says about the Church is abundantly clear to us "we have this treasure in earthen vessels"(2 Cor 4:7). Our leaders, like us, are earthenware pots: cracked, chipped and often worn out, but as Bishop Robert Barron points out "The vessels are fragile and many of them are downright broken; but we don’t' stay because of the vessels. We stay because of the treasure".

And in our age, as in every age, the Lord is raising up saints in all walks of life, who by opening their hearts and their lives to the treasure found in Jesus, are fearlessly spreading the joy of His Gospel – the Good News that Jesus brings. In the words of St Paul, God uses these earthen vessels to proclaim His message "to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us" (2 Cor 4:7).

Thirdly we are tempted to doubt the influence we can have in our own communities. The early Christians had just as much to contend with as we have. They were an oppressed and sometimes persecuted minority, and they also had moral failures in their leaders, but they rejoiced in their Sunday gatherings, because they lived for Christ who alone was the victor over sin and death! On his journey towards martyrdom in Rome in the year 108, St Ignatius of Antioch wrote to the Christians at Ephesus: "Take heed, then, often to come together to give thanks to God, and show forth His praise. For when you assemble frequently in the same place, the powers of Satan are destroyed, and the destruction at which he (Satan) aims is prevented by the unity of your faith".

None of us can have that vital 'personal' relationship with Christ without living relationships with His Body, the Church. To really encounter Christ, to love Him, is to consent to loving Him with others. The love which grows and flowers in a living relationship with Jesus impels us to love and care for His Church. That means to love and serve these brothers and sisters, in this parish, here and now.

Dear brothers and sisters, we can overcome these three temptations of:

* spiritual sloth,
* disillusionment with the Church, and
* disengagement from our brothers and sisters in the Lord

by taking up the invitation to grace which Jesus gives us in these days. Most importantly we can give ourselves more to prayer this Lent: perhaps by going to Mass more frequently than we have been; perhaps by attending the Stations of the Cross or the Hour of Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament on Friday evenings. In our private prayer a great strength can come from saying the Rosary and from prayerfully reading the Gospel each day.

Brothers and sisters, let us not allow these days of grace to pass us by without making an effort to open our hearts to the love and mercy of Jesus. He can change our hearts. And by transforming you and me, Jesus can renew His Church. That renewal will spread like a fire, the fire of His love, to transform our community, our suburbs and our city.

Come Holy Spirit fill the hearts of Your faithful and kindle in us the fire of Your love.