

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

St. Matthew 4:1-11

Celebrating Ash Wednesday we have begun the holy season of Lent, the forty days of penance and preparation for the great solemnity of the resurrection of Christ at Easter.

The number forty has a great deal of meaning in our faith. In Noah's time rain fell for forty days and forty nights causing the great flood. Moses and the Hebrew people after escaping from Egypt wandered in the desert for forty years before reaching the promised land, and Moses spent forty days and forty nights on Mount Sinai when he received the Ten Commandments. Goliath challenged the Israelites for forty days before David defeated him with a stone. After His death the body of Christ lay forty hours in the tomb, and there were forty days between His resurrection and His ascension into Heaven. And, of course, Christ spent forty days in the wilderness—and it is from this that we get the forty days of Lent.

Just as the Blessed Virgin Mary is known as the new Eve, so Christ is known as the new Adam. At the beginning of creation Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden but tempted by Satan they were expelled into the wilderness and the gates of paradise were closed to them and guarded by an Angel with a flaming sword. Now at the beginning of our salvation Christ, who dwelt in Paradise with God the Father, expelled Himself into the wilderness. There He, too, just as Adam and Eve, was tempted by Satan. But unlike them He fought back and defeated the Devil. And once Satan left Him Angels ministered to Him. In this way Christ began the reversal of the fall of man brought about by Adam and Eve.

In Lent we, also, enter into this drama. On Ash Wednesday ashes were placed on our head with the sign of the Cross, just as holy oil was placed on our head at our Baptism. At our Baptism the stain of original sin inherited from our first parents, Adam and Eve, was removed and we gained a state of grace. But as we grew we fell to personal sin and that state of grace was lost. And so the holy oil that shone on our heads at Baptism was replaced with the dark ashes of Ash Wednesday—a reminder to us that while Adam and Eve lost us paradise we, too, bear responsibility for the loss of heaven.

And so in forty days of Lent, we who were expelled from paradise into the wilderness follow Christ into the desert, so that He, by His coming Passion, Death, and Resurrection, can lead us out of our exile to the new promised land. But we have to make a choice for this. We have to choose to participate in the devotions of Lent—prayer, fasting and almsgiving—because heaven is not something we can take for granted, it is something we must fight for.