

Did you listen to that wonderful profession of faith that Moses directed the Israelites to recite every year as part of their celebration of 'First Fruits'? Doesn't it resonate with us today?

The wonderful gifts the Lord has given to each and every one of us, the feeling we often have of being aliens within our country because of the prevalence of the culture of death that surrounds us. Our total reliance on God to keep us safe and to guide us as we change our country to embrace the culture of life; and finally the importance of offering to God the first fruits of our labor, because without him, we can't accomplish anything, but with him all things are possible.

Hold that thought because we will come back to it later. In the Gospel today Jesus, after fasting in the wilderness for 40 days suffers 3 temptations.

The first temptation is to turn a rock into bread. An easy task for Jesus, after all didn't God provide Manna for the Israelites in the desert? But this is a demand without consideration of the moral consequences of making people dependent on someone else for their physical needs.

During the decline and fall of the Roman Empire it was bread and circuses; the attempt to control peoples behavior by providing for their physical needs with the hope that in return they will let the ruling class do whatever they want to do in exchange. We see many ruling classes and governments still using this technique today, with the same dismal results that the Roman's experienced.

What are the fruits of this temptation? The loss of self determination, loss of the self respect that comes from the dignity of work, loss of the nuclear family, the basic building block of society because it isn't needed any more. All physical needs are to be provided not by the family but by someone else.

The second temptation, all of the kingdoms of the earth will be yours. Silly Devil, all of the kingdoms of heaven and earth have always belonged to the Lord! The Devil was trying to bring Jesus down to our level tempting him with secular power, tempting him to become the messiah people were expecting. Tempting him to conquer the world by secular means. In recent history we see this temptation played out in Hitler, Stalin, and Mao se Tung to name a few. Today we have North Korea and the Islamic State with the

same goal in mind. In a business or political setting the temptation is to divide and conquer, set one faction against the other in order to secure power.

At its extreme, the fruits of this temptation are war in its various forms, pestilence and death. In the political and business worlds it translates to conflict, waste of resources, ruined careers and loss of productive jobs. Quite different from the benefits we would receive by following Our Lord's plan of forgiveness, reconciliation and cooperation.

The third temptation, throw your self from the top of the Temple and float to the ground in front of all these people. This will establish your 'credentials' as the Son of Man and the rest of your earthly mission will be easy! No one will question you because you now have 'creds'. You can do whatever you want may even get to skip that nasty death that is in your future.

Don't we see this today at all levels in our society? People who think that because they have done 'whatever' that they are now above the 'little people' and can do anything they want. Hasn't it played out that greater the position in society in the minds of these people, the greater the temptation to rely on their 'creds' for protection and greater the damage caused by their actions?

The fruits of this temptation include the loss of our moral compass, the dehumanization of entire groups of people in our perception and untold misery for the victims our bad behavior. Why our? Because this temptation is easily within our reach and it calls out to us every day whispering in our ear that for some reason we are better than that person over there.

Then there is that last haunting line in today's Gospel, "When the devil had finished with all the tempting, he left him, to await another opportunity." Granted, Jesus falling to temptation is the grand prize, but do any of us think that Satan doesn't pay just as much attention to suborning us to his purposes? How can we fight this powerful enemy without God's help? Of course the answer is we can't. Without God's help, we can do nothing. We are totally dependent on his grace to preserve our soul from heading down the path to the pit of destruction demonstrated by these 3 and many other temptations.

Paul reminds us today that faith in the heart requires us to confess that faith in our thoughts, words and actions. Lent is a time for us to renew our efforts, to change our lives to make them more pleasing to God, to beg for God's mercy and to thank him for his efforts on our behalf.

On Ash Wednesday, Fr. Gaul spoke to the basics, prayer, fasting and alms giving. I want to take the exercise a step further by asking. What is our plan for Lent? How do we show our gratitude to God in our daily lives as the Israelites on the Feast of First Fruits? What are we adding to our lives that will help us meet these goals?

But this is Lent, shouldn't we be giving something up? Yes we should but in our busy lives, by definition, when we add something, we are going to have to give something up.

Saying the Rosary as a family every night means getting your homework done right away, planning a schedule so you can be together, turning off the TV, pads and phones for 30 minutes and maybe, just maybe taking time to just talk and be together as a family.

Maybe every night is too much so you set time aside on Wednesday evenings for Holy Hour or Friday evenings for soup supper and Stations of the Cross. What about joining in the small group discussions on 'Rediscovering Jesus' or going on line for 'the Best Lent Ever'?

Fasting from food is the traditional way to fast and brings us closer to the great suffering masses of humanity on the earth, but what about other forms of fasting? How about turning all of the phones and other social media devices in the house off at 7:00 PM every day and not turning them again until 7:00 AM the next day? Isn't there an opportunity there to enjoy some face-to-face social interaction during that electronically dark time?

Giving Alms directly relieves suffering as Father taught us on Wednesday, but wouldn't it be great to participate in that effort as well? Go to SAM's Club or BJ's and purchase food, toiletries, paper towels and toilet paper. Make sure they are in family size quantities, not 50lb bags and take them down to the ALMS HOUSE on Patterson Street here in Hope Mills. If you don't want to buy food, purchase some warm blankets and bring them in. Help stock the food pantry; clean the floors or help them to serve food to the hungry over at the Hope House. Meet the poor and disenfranchised in our own community. Put a face to the term 'poor'.

We have been blessed with so much! Faith in a God who became one of us to die for us to save us to spend eternity with him, friends and family to share our lives with and worldly wealth; we have enough to eat, a roof over our heads, clean water to drink, sufficient clothing and relative safety from harm. If you don't think that is wealth, just ask someone who has served in a third world country. We are very wealthy indeed compared to the rest of the world.

Now is the time to take the first fruits of the gifts God has given us and lay them at the foot of his altar.