

HOMILY for FIRST SUNDAY of LENT – Year C

When the preacher's car broke down on a country road, he walked to a nearby roadhouse to use the phone (this is before our current time of personal cell phone!). After calling for a tow truck, he spotted his old friend, Frank, drunk & shabbily dressed at the bar. "What happened to you, Frank?" asked the good reverend. "You used to be rich."

Frank told a sad tale of bad investments that have led to his downfall. "Go home," the preacher said. "Open your Bible at random, stick your finger on the page & there will be God's answer for you."

Sometime later, the preacher bumped into Frank, who was wearing Gucci shoes, sporting a Rolex watch, & had just stepped out of a Mercedes. "Frank," said the preacher, "I am glad to see things really turned around for you."

"Yes, preacher, and I owe it all to you," said Frank. "I opened my Bible, put my finger down on the page, & there was the answer – Chapter 11."

Anyway, our lives are full of defining moments like that. Those moments are often marked by crises & life-changing experiences. They pose tough questions to us about the future direction of our lives. They make us review our past & decide on what we'll have to do next. If we make a wrong decision or pick a bad choice, it will lead us down the wrong path & affect our future negatively. Worst yet, it'll badly influence others around us for many generations to come. Indeed, there were a couple of defining moments in the history for God's people that this Sunday's Readings want to point out to us & help us learn from them.

The First Reading reminds us of the historical moment that Moses & God's people had to face; but they were able to turn it into fruitful results for them. Here is how they recalled it, "...My Father was a wandering Aramean who went down to Egypt with a small household & lived there as an alien. But, there he became a nation great, strong, & numerous. When the Egyptians maltreated & oppressed us, imposing hard labor upon us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, & He heard our cry & saw our affliction, our toil & our oppression. He brought us out of Egypt with His strong hand & outstretched arm, with terrifying power, with signs & wonders; & bringing us into this country. He gave us this land flowing with milk & honey." So, God's people faced oppression & maltreatment by the Egyptians. They had no one to defend them & had to call on the Lord for help. The Lord sent them Moses to lead them out of Egypt & then to the Promised Land. The Bible did not discuss at length on how Moses & God's people had to wrestle with that tough decision. But, we can only imagine how difficult it must have been for them. At that moment, along with Moses, they had to decide whether they would take on that dangerous & uncertain journey. If they did not, who knows where they might have been. Worst yet, they would never have a chance to enter the Promised Land. Their decision at that crucial moment had changed their lives & the course of history forever.

Meanwhile, today's Gospel shares with us another defining moment that affected the people of God & changed the history of the world forever. That moment came when Jesus decided if He would go up to Jerusalem & offer His life for the salvation of God's people. His decision, like Moses', affected the fate of God's people & the future of the world. The Bible never highlighted that defining moment in the Gospel with red ink or with lengthy discussion of Jesus' deliberation. All we heard about was His Last Supper with His disciples & a short moment of prayer by Himself in the Garden of Gethsemani. But, Jesus actually had contemplated His

decision of saving us & prepared Himself for it long before that, beginning with today's Gospel. He knew that His decision would affect the fate of God's people & change the course of history forever. That's why He went into the desert for forty days to deliberate on this important decision & figure out how He would prepare Himself for it.

We do not know what went on in His head during that time. But, we were told that Jesus was tempted by the Devil to lure Him away from His mission of salvation. The Devil first tempted Jesus about His daily basic necessities, namely, food & drink. Like a champion who prepares for the biggest fight of his life, Jesus tried to prepare Himself spiritually for His upcoming struggle. He felt that fasting from excessive food & drink will help strengthen His spirit & keep Him more focused on His mission of salvation. That is why the Devil tempted Him on food by telling Him to turn a stone into a loaf of bread. But, Jesus did not give in to that temptation of hunger & let it distract Him from His mission. Imagine if you're trying to go on diet to improve your self-image & keep your health longevity, you would know how difficult it would be to commit yourself to that mission.

Anyway, the Devil might have failed at its first temptation. Still, it tried to lure Jesus with power & wealth of all the kingdoms of the world. However, Jesus pushed back that temptation & refused to worship the Devil to get it. He said, "You shall do homage to the Lord your God; Him alone shall you adore." In other words, Jesus wants to remind us that we should not worship the Devil & all of its worldly things. Otherwise, the Devil will control us & drive us to do lots of its evil things for the sake of power & wealth. We certainly have seen how the Devil used that trick everyday throughout the world. The Devil pushes world leaders to abuse their power & try to grab more of it. The Devil stirs up urban gangsters to project their power by shooting randomly at innocent people & causing senseless violence all over America. The Devil has done the same thing with wealth as it has caused the rich to misuse that blessing & get greedy & selfish with it. It has also made the common man to lie and sell his soul for a few more dollars. But, Jesus calls us to resist the temptation of power & wealth if we want to finish the journey of the Cross with Him.

Lastly, the Devil attempted to test Jesus' faith in God the Father by telling Him to jump off the steeple of the temple while expecting some sort of divine help. Jesus certainly would not put His relationship with God the Father to the test that way. For He believed that God the Father would never abandon Him or intentionally wish bad things to happen to Him in spite of some doubtful moments. But, in the end, the Devil could not divide Jesus from His God the Father & make Him subject to its bad influences.

My dear brothers & sisters, both Moses & Jesus recognized the defining moments in their lives & stepped up to complete them with courage & inspiration. Because of them, God's people have been saved & made it to the Promised Land. If we know how important this Lenten time is for us Christians, we will step up to celebrate it wholeheartedly & look forward to complete it with the Easter miracle & promise of our own resurrection on the Last Day.