

## 1st Sunday of Lent “The Meaning of Life”

Fr. Frank Schuster

My friends, we have entered into the season of Lent. The readings this Sunday are wonderfully matched. Holy Mother the Church has given us these readings today in the hopes that we will use Lent as an opportunity to get back to the basics of the Spirit Life. And so, the Church points back to the opening chapters of Genesis, the creation and the fall, the story of what went right and the story of what went wrong.

Notice how the first reading from Genesis begins, “the Lord God formed man out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life.” What is this saying? What Genesis is saying is: Everything that we are, everything that I am, all the gifts I possess, and even existence itself is a gift from God. Without the breath that God gives me, I am just clay from the ground. The name Adam itself literally means, “From the earth”. What is the message? Ultimately speaking, we don’t own or have possession of our own lives. Life is a gift, life itself is a grace, and we are owed nothing in this life. Everything is gift. If we were to summarize the basic spiritual insight, it would sound like this: Our lives do not belong to us. Our existence is not about us. Our existence rather is received from God. If our existence is received from God we ought to live our lives for God. That is the first insight of the bible.

Is this bad news? As if, oh no, I don’t have possession of my life, my life does not belong to me! To a society at times drunk on radical individualism this can sound like bad news, but it isn’t. This is good news, why? God breathes life into us. We have a living God who wants us to live with his breath and live with his life. We have existence because of his breath. And that is very good news! When we pretend that we live and breathe on our own terms, we eventually will become miserable. The opening chapters of Genesis teach us that God did not create us to be miserable but rather to be fully alive. This reminds me of that famous statement from St. Irenaeus, “Gloria enim Dei vivens homo vita autem hominis visio Dei” (*Against Heresies*, 4,20,7). The glory of God is a fully alive human being and the life of a human being consists of seeing God.

And so Genesis says, God creates a garden for human beings to live in. Is God’s agenda to lord it over us, enslave us, or dominate us? No. God wants to breathe his life into us and place us in a garden where we can flourish. Notice that we get practically full reign of this garden too! God says, “Enjoy the whole garden, except for that one thing”. As Bishop Barron would interpret this passage, God wants us to eat from the tree of art, God wants us to have science, God wants us to have politics, sports, and entertainment, God wants us to have these things, God wants us to enjoy the fruits of these trees, God wants us to be fully alive.

Now enter the serpent. The serpent is God’s creature, and this is a very important point. The serpent isn’t an equal player with God, but rather one of God’s creatures. The Christian faith has always resisted crazy dualisms that suggest that a power of evil exists, that is somehow on some kind of equal footing with God, in some kind of eternal

wrestling match with God. No, the serpent is one of God's creatures and is permitted to do what he does.

The serpent asks the woman about the forbidden tree. The woman answers the serpent, "We may eat the fruit of the trees in the garden; it is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, "You shall not eat it or even touch it, lest you die." The serpent tells the woman, "You certainly will not die! No, God knows well that the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know what is good and what is evil."

Stop right there! Now we know how not to read God's prohibition against eating the tree in the middle of the garden, as if God wants to keep something from you, as if God is your rival, that is now how not to read God's prohibition here. How do we read it? God is saying, eat of all the other trees in the garden, the tree of science, the tree of art, sports, entertainment, etc. but don't eat of that one tree, the tree that appropriates to yourself the prerogative or the claim that you can gain for your ego the measure of what is right and what is wrong. The measure of what is right and what is wrong belongs to God not to us.

Listen, following Irenaeus, *Gloria enim Dei vivens homo*, the glory of God is a human being fully alive and the meaning of human life is to see God, God is therefore the judge of what is ultimately right and what is ultimately wrong. Since we are creatures and God is the creator, we can't do that properly for ourselves. When we vainly attempt to make ourselves a higher judge than God of what is good and what is evil, we put ourselves into a rival relationship with the Author of Creation. We begin to lose life.

My friends, this is the tragedy that Genesis is putting its finger on: Your life is not about you, your life comes from God, not you, and therefore, God is the measure of what is good, evil, right and wrong, not you. The tragedy is both Adam and Eve fall for it. The Genesis story begins with everyone and everything in right relationship and harmony. They eat of the forbidden fruit, and what's the first thing that happens? Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the serpent. Adam and Eve are no longer in harmony with God but are now rivals with God. They are expelled from the Garden not because God is vindictive but rather, they basically expelled themselves when they decided to no longer live for God but rather live for themselves. And death enters into the world because their egos can't provide them the breath of life that God gives. Humanity finds itself outside of the garden, awaiting a savior.

Let's now switch gears and take a closer look at the Gospel and what do we see? Notice that as our savior Jesus confronts Satan how Jesus reverses what happened in the garden! After Jesus' baptism, the Spirit leads Jesus into the desert to be tempted by the devil. There Jesus fasts for forty days and forty nights and afterwards the Gospel says he was hungry, reasonable enough. And then, the tempter comes and says to him, "If you're the Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread". On the one hand, the devil can sound very reasonable, just like he did in the garden, you are hungry, feed yourself. But underneath it all, the devil is really communicating: Hey Jesus, why all this

fasting for God when gratifying your appetites is so much more comfortable? Why not make sensual pleasure the determining value of your life? How does Jesus answer? “Not on bread alone is man to live but from every utterance that comes from God”. Notice how this reverses what happened in the Garden. My primary guiding principle in life is not about gratifying my wants. My primary guiding principle in life is to listen to God who alone determines my meaning. Do you see the reversal of what happened in the Garden?

Again, Satan takes Jesus and makes him stand on the parapet of the temple and says, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, so we can see the angels protect you.” Come on Jesus, put yourself on display, as if the most important thing in life is to put my ego on display, look at me world, even God dances to my tune. Come on Jesus: make your ego the highest good! Jesus responds, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test, it is God’s desires that matter, not mine!

Finally, the Devil takes Jesus to a high mountaintop, and in a glimpse is shown all the kingdoms of the world, “All this I will give you Jesus if you simply bow down and worship me.” Come on Jesus, what really matters in life is power, might equals right! We are right back to Nietzsche and radical individualism again. Do you see what the devil is trying to do? Jesus refuses, “Get away Satan! It is written: The Lord, your God, shall you worship, and him alone shall you serve!”

And these, my friends, are the three temptations the devil will use with you and me to separate us from God in life: the Devil will use sensual pleasure, the Devil will inflate our egos, and the Devil will tempt us with power. If we allow ourselves to travel down this very dark path, the cost can be our relationships with our families, the cost can be our relationships with our friends, the cost can be our relationship with the Church, our environment, and our relationship with God. Ultimately, the cost can be our very souls if we go down this dark path.

Therefore my friends, we have entered into Lent. The Church has asked us to get back to the basics by fasting, prayer and almsgiving/service of God and neighbor. Fasting helps us keep any addiction to sensual pleasure at bay, almsgiving and service helps keep any addiction to power at rest because now I am thinking about others, and prayer is a good reminder to our egos that God must always be first in our lives. *Gloria enim Dei vivens homo*, the glory of God is a human being fully alive and the meaning of life is the vision of God.

Christians, as we enter the holy season of Lent, we are reminded that our lives do not belong to us, they belong to Jesus. It is Jesus that breathes life into our nostrils, it is Jesus that feeds us his body and blood, and it is Jesus who will raise us up on the last day. Therefore we join Jesus in the desert to fast and pray for forty days and forty nights. And we will be tempted. On this first Sunday of Lent, we pray for the grace to pass the test!