

Septuagesima Sunday

Dearly Beloved,

With this Sunday's liturgy begins the season of ***Septuagesima***, a 30-day period always beginning nine weeks before Easter. This liturgical season is a prelude to Lent, and a remote preparation for Easter itself. It serves as a time of transition between the joy of the Christmas which ended, absolutely speaking at Candlemas, and the stern penance of the 40 days of Lent. Even though the Lenten fast is not yet in force, the liturgical color has changed to the sobriety of purple. As during Advent and Lent, the ***Gloria*** is no longer sung at Mass. It will reappear at the Easter celebration when Christ is praised in His resurrected body.

In the Martyrology, Septuagesima is further described as a time in which "we lay aside the song of the Lord which is ***Alleluia***." For, as the psalmist says, "How can we sing the song of the Lord in alien soil?" For the practicing Christian this alien land is none other than the exile of the present world which abounds in sin. ***Alleluia*** will also return to our lips and ears at Easter, for this great Christian acclamation represents the future

life; it is a foretaste of the heavenly liturgy which our earthly worship imitates. It is towards the glory of God's praises in eternity that we strive throughout the whole of our earthly pilgrimage.

The 40 days of Lent, known as **Quadragesima**, and the present season of three successive periods of ten days each, (namely **Septuagesima, Sexagesima, and Quinquagesima**, also represent the seventy years spent by Israel in exile under the captivity of the Babylonians. One reason that Alleluia is silenced during this long season is because its penitential spirit has been deliberately given by the Church. Throughout, we are vividly reminded of being, in fact, the "poor banished children of Eve, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears and sorrows.

Indeed, the whole of this cycle of penance and Easter preparation is a time during which we must cry to God from the very depths of our souls as today's Introit says, seeking the forgiveness of our sins and the salvation which Christ alone can give.

During this season the Church takes up a study of the Old Testament in the texts of her worship. There we find the great figures who foretold the Redemptive work of Christ and whose

work, in prefiguring that of Our Lord, prepares us for the worthy celebration of Easter when the Church celebrates the Lord's definitive triumph over sin and death. "Search the Scriptures," says Our Lord, "they are the same which give testimony of me."

Thus, were you to be present for the readings of the Night Office of Matins throughout this pre-Lenten season you would find that on this, Septuagesima Sunday, they begin the account of the fall of Adam which is the root of original sin; on Sexagesima they begin to speak of the malice of men, their actual sin and the terrible flood which was its punishment. On Quinquagesima the sacrifices of Abraham and Melchisedech, are begun to be retold. These foreshadowed the sacrifice God required of His own Son as satisfaction for the sins of the whole human race.

Today's assertion of the dogma of Original Sin and the portrayal of its terrible consequences makes Christ's title of Savior stand out more clearly in our approach to the penance necessary for Lent. Together they prepare us to more knowingly celebrate the triumph of His Easter resurrection.

The Gospel of the Laborers in today's Mass and that of the Sower, next Sunday, both remind

us that redemption is extended to all men alike. The cure of the blind man at Jericho following the proclamation of the Passion shows us the salutary effects produced in us by the cross of Christ. The epistles of Saint Paul read in their turn over these next three Sundays remind us during this season that the Church must complete Christ's work by entering with courage into the purifying discipline of penance during the great Lenten fast.

As was just alluded to the Night Office this week, its lessons and responses, all taken from the Book of Genesis, relate the story of the ***Creation of the world and man***, our first parents' fall and the promise of a Redeemer, followed by the murder of Abel and a record of the generations between Adam and Noah. Next Sunday and its week take up the story from the Flood onward.

In this week's account we are reminded that Adam very deliberately failed in the test that God put before him. "Because thou hast eaten of the tree whereby I commanded you thee that thou shouldest not eat, cursed is the earth in thy work; with labor and toil shalt thou eat thereof all the days of thy life. Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to the...In the sweat of thy face shalt

thou eat bread till thou return to the earth out of which thou wast taken.”

“Being exiled from Eden,” says St. Augustine, “the first man involved all his descendants in the penalty of death and reprobation, being corrupted in the person of him from whom they sprung. The whole mass of condemned humanity was, therefore, plunged into misery, enslaved and cast headlong from one evil to another.” As though corroborating this great doctor’s words, today’s Introit sings, “The sorrows of death surrounded me.” The Collect adds that we are “justly afflicted for our sins”. In the Epistle, Paul represents the Christian life as an arena where a man must take pains and strive to carry off the prize after sacrificial preparation. The Gospel bears witness that the reward of eternal life is only given to those who work in God’s vineyard where work is hard and painful – all due to our sinful state in this present life.

But, “in His wisdom,” says St. Gregory, “Almighty God preferred rather to bring good out of evil than never allow evil to occur.” For God took pity on men and promised them a Second Adam, who restoring the order disturbed by the first, would allow them to regain heaven to which

Adam had lost all right when he sinned and was expelled from the Garden of Paradise.

Beloved, this is the glory of our Redemption and the hope of our Christian faith. For through the providential fault of Adam has come the Lord Jesus, the mercy and love of God, Who wonderfully created man but more wondrously still has redeemed him. Indeed, in the words of a prayer from Holy Saturday, “the creation of the world in the beginning was not a more excellent thing than the immolation of Christ Our Passover at the end of time.”

Today’s Mass, when studied in the light of Adam’s fall, prepares our minds for the beginning of the Septuagesima Season, and helps us understand the sublime character of the Paschal mystery for which these next thirty days prepares our hearts.

In response to the call of the Master who seeks us in the depths into which we are plunged, let us stand aright: let us take up our work in the Lord’s vineyard; let us enter into the arena of our daily lives and struggle manfully as is the duty and challenge of the Christian life. This means death to oneself and complete submission to the commandments of God. In this season in particular, let us be mindful of the gravity of sin

and its consequences – so evident everywhere around us – let us remind ourselves of the need of redemption and prepare ourselves, with humility, for the necessary cleansing of the yearly Lenten penance soon to come.