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THE BISHOP

Lenten Message 2010

Lent and the Victory of the Lamb

To the priests, deacons, religious and all the faithful,

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor 1:2).

With Ash Wednesday, we enter the Holy Season of Lent. These special forty days before the celebration of the Resurrection on Easter Sunday are days of prayer, penance and works of charity. They take their origin from the practice of the Church to prepare catechumens for their entrance into the Church through Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist at the Easter Vigil. All of us join in the great season of grace to renew our own commitment to Christ and enter more deeply into the Church, which Christ has placed in this world as the sign and instrument of salvation (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 1).

These grace-filled days call us to be holy. All of us are called to be holy, not just those behind cloistered walls or those involved in ministry. Holiness is the vocation of all the baptized. "In the Church, everyone whether belonging to the hierarchy, or being cared for by it, is called to holiness, according to the saying of the Apostle: 'For this is the will of God, your sanctification' " (*Lumen Gentium*, 5). To help you enter more deeply into this holy season, I offer the following biblical meditation to encourage you to hand yourself over to "him who is able to accomplish far more than all we ask or imagine, by [his] power at work within us" (Eph 3:20).

In the drama of our human response to the goodness of God, we do not stand alone. In Sacred Scripture, there are two figures who refuse to remain neutral to our human struggle: the serpent and the lamb. Each embodies a choice. The first stands for self-autonomy; the second, true freedom.

Genesis shows us the world fresh from the hands of the Creator. And it is good. The first account of creation (Gen 1:1-2:4) repeats the statement that the world is good seven times (1:4.10.12.18.21.25.31). Seven represents the number of perfection. Thus, the world is not deficient as it comes from God. Rather, it corresponds to God's design. There is order. Thus, Genesis moves us to a sense of optimism about the world. All that God creates has a purpose.

With special solemnity, Genesis introduces the creation of man and woman: "Then God said: 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness'" (Gen 1:26). God is pictured as deliberating about creating man and woman. This emphasizes their special dignity that comes from the choice of God. Man and woman come as the crowning act of God's creative activity.

According to Genesis, our relationship with God differs from all other creatures. We are gifted with human freedom and are called to cooperate with God's plan for his world. Into our hands God has entrusted stewardship of his creation (Gen 1:26-30). In fact, it is after God has given us "dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth," (Gen 1:28), "that God looked at everything...and he found it very good" (Gen 1:31). The future of his world depends on us and he sees this as "very good." What a strong affirmation of our human potential.

However, the second narrative of creation (Gen 2:4-3:24) exposes the risk that God has taken in giving us such a far-reaching role in his plan. Adam and Eve must choose either to be stewards of creation according to God's plan or to be masters of the world according to their own designs. In this second account of creation, the serpent enters Scripture for the first time. By the end of the Old Testament, the serpent is identified with the devil (Wis 2:24). The serpent flings before Adam and Eve the seductive promise that they would find happiness in being autonomous from God. They accept his word and turn from the word that God has spoken to them. They place self over God and their freedom is diminished. "The father of lies" (Jn 8:44) deceived humankind. Enslaved in the prison of self, they now long for the one who would come to redeem them.

Under the image of the lamb, God prepares his people for the Redeemer who will restore true freedom. When Israel becomes enslaved to Egypt, God stretches out his hand and rescues his people. In the great event of the Exodus, the Israelites whose homes are sprinkled with the blood of the lamb are spared death and are set on freedom's path through the Red Sea to the Promised Land. What the serpent had promised, the lamb provides: true freedom.

When God's people continually face the loss of their freedom under cruel oppressors, the prophets stir up hope for the Messiah who would set them free, not simply from political oppression, but from the slavery of sin. The prophet Isaiah speaks of this Messiah as the one who "shall take away the sins of many, and win pardon for their offenses" (Is 53:12). To him, he applies the image of the lamb. "Like a lamb led to the slaughter...he was silent and opened not his mouth" (Is 53:7). What the serpent had promised, the lamb provides: true freedom.

In the fourth gospel, when Jesus appears for the first time in his public ministry, John the Baptist gathers up all the expectations of the Old Testament. Pointing Jesus out to his own disciples, the Baptist exclaims, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn 1:29) In this same gospel, Jesus fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah, "when he was cut off from the land of the living, and smitten for the sin of his people," (Is 53:8), the evangelist tells us that Jesus dies on the Cross at the very moment when the Passover lambs were being sacrificed in the temple. The death of Jesus and the sacrifice of the lambs coincided.

Jesus “was led forth like a lamb; he was slaughtered like a sheep. He ransomed us from our servitude to the world, as he had ransomed Israel from the hand of Egypt; he freed us from our slavery to the devil, as he had freed Israel from the hand of Pharaoh. He sealed our souls with his own Spirit, and the members of our body with his own blood” (St. Melito of Sardis, *Easter Homily on the Passover*). Jesus is the true Lamb that takes away sin and offers us authentic freedom.

In the very last book of Sacred Scripture, the serpent (the dragon) and the Lamb face the final hour. Each takes his stance. The dragon is Satan. He has his “own power and throne, along with great authority” (Rev 13:2). He has been able to seduce individuals and nations to turn from God’s wise providence and to choose self.

Opposite the dragon is the Lamb. He is victorious. He stands in the center of the worshipping community in heaven where all cry out, “Worthy are you to receive the scroll and to break open its seals, for you were slain and with your blood you purchased for God those from every tribe and tongue, people and nation. You made them a kingdom and priests for our God, and they will reign on earth” (Rev 5:9-10).

Not by mere coincidence does the last book of the Scriptures speak most often of Jesus the Redeemer with the title of the Lamb. Seven times, Revelation uses Jesus’ personal name. But twenty-nine times, Revelation refers to Jesus as the Lamb. By his death, Jesus conquers sin and death. He gives us true freedom and everlasting life.

In our human struggle to respond to God’s call to enter into a relationship of trust and co-operation, the serpent or dragon appears as the one who seduces and deceives us. His false promises of satisfaction, self-importance and personal honor try to avert our gaze from the all-loving presence of God and turn us inward on ourselves. The Lamb, however, leads us through death to self to become open to the goodness of God who is ever present to share with us the wealth of his love.

During this holy season of Lent, we enter more deeply into the victory of “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev 13:8). Already in our Baptism, we have turned from Satan. We have renounced his works. But the struggle against him has not ended. The serpent is still with us. He deceives many with materialistic ideologies that leave no room for God. He convinces others that consumerism and entertainment can fill the void within the human heart.

During this time of grace, we open ourselves to the power of the Lamb whose obedience to the Father’s will strengthens us not to return evil with evil but to respond with only good. We wish to become more gentle, more meek, more self-giving, and ready to submit to the will of the Lord.

Like Jesus himself whose life was a continual prayer, we give more time to personal prayer and to the prayer of the Church, especially the Eucharist. Our prayer, especially daily Eucharist when possible, unites us to Jesus who gives us the grace to know God’s will and the strength to do so. We make Christ’s words in the Agony in the Garden our own -- “Not my will but yours be done” (Lk 22:42) — so that our deeds become what our words proclaim: the fulfillment of God’s purpose in our lives.

Like Christ who himself entered the desert and fasted for forty days (Mk 1:12-13), we fast from the good things of this world to make room for the more spiritual and lasting. Our fasting empties us of worldly desires for what pleases the flesh so that we can more readily do what is best for our spiritual welfare.

And like Christ whose compassion touched all whom he met, we practice ever more generous charity (almsgiving), seeking to be united with all in love. Our almsgiving, our works of charity, turn us outward, away from our selfish interests to the true needs of others and in so doing open us up to God. For our love of neighbor is our love of God.

Through our Lenten discipline, we ready ourselves to take our place at the great Supper of the Lamb. We prepare to enter into the great Paschal Feast where the Lamb once slain sets us free and makes his victory ours as well. We wish to be those of whom the Scripture says, "These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They have been ransomed as the first fruits of the human race for God and the Lamb" (Rev 14:4).

Given at the Pastoral Center of the Diocese of Paterson on Ash Wednesday, the 17th of February, 2010.

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