

First Sunday of Lent
March 8 & 9, 2014

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My dear Brothers and Sisters.

I would like to say a few words about two passages of the readings we just heard. The first one is from the Book of Genesis, chapter 2, and the second from the Gospel of Saint Matthew about the temptation of Jesus in the desert.

We read in the book of Genesis, chapter 2, "The Lord God formed man out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and so man became a living being." What does this sentence mean? How should we interpret it?

There has been an ongoing controversy that started with the Oxford Meeting in 1860, when Samuel Wilberforce, the bishop of Oxford, wanted to obliterate any idea of evolution. This was followed by the Scopes trial in 1925 about preventing the teaching of evolution in the schools of Tennessee. And finally, this was followed by what is called "Creation Science" and "Intelligent Design", another form of Creation Science, in the later half of the last century, demanding equal rights to teach in schools both: creation and evolution.

Properly read, there should be no controversy at all. The book of Genesis had its last revision that we would recognize as "Genesis" around 600 BC after the return of the Israelites from Exile. The writing includes a faith statement about the one God who created all that is. This faith statement was set against a polytheistic background of mythologies that surrounded the Jewish people around the time of Moses. It is a demythologizing writing reducing all gods and goddesses of polytheism to their created nature, such as the sun, the moon, the earth, the stars etc. The writing was also set in the language of the time characterized by dominant patriarchy, and deep anthropomorphism, two cultural biases. (He created him, created in six days, and rested on the seventh day.)

Good scriptural scholarship requires that we go back in time, understand the knowledge, the language, and the culture of that time, take the faith statement out of its cultural wrappings, and bring back it into our present time, into our own culture, language, and knowledge. The creation statement remains the same, there is but one God who created all that is. But the way we understand what is being created changes as time goes on because our knowledge becomes more and more accurate and detailed. In the ancient times the earth was flat, which meant for the people of that time that God created a flat earth. Later on, around the beginning of the first century, people saw the earth as the center of the universe, so God created a geocentric world. And later, as our technology improved in the 17th and 18th centuries, we realized that God created a heliocentric world. And finally, in the 19th century, we observed that life on earth

is evolving, so God's creation became an ever unfolding process. It is not the faith statement of creation that is changing, but the way we understand better and better the created world.

So properly understood, there is no controversy. Faith gives us the fact of creation, and science provides an ever improving understanding of the created. Science gives realism to faith, and faith gives meaning to science.

As to the Gospel reading, I am choosing the third temptation when the evil spirit took Jesus up to a very high mountain and showed him all the power and riches of the world and said: "All these I shall give to you if you will prostrate yourself and worship me." At this Jesus said to him, "Get away, Satan! It is written: The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve."

My Sisters and Brothers, remember the words we heard as we received ashes on Ash Wednesday: "Turn away from sin, and believe in the Gospel." This is exactly what Jesus was doing when He was tempted in the desert. His answer was a clear and simple NO, reinforced by listening to the Word of God: "It is written" First "It is written one does not live on bread alone". Then "Again it is written: You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test." And the third time: "Get away, Satan! It is written: The Lord, your God, shall you worship and Him alone shall you serve."

During the transfiguration on the mountain the sky opened and a voice was heard: "This is my beloved Son. Listen to Him." And that is why we have two parts in our liturgy: one is the Word of God, and the other is Jesus' presence in the Eucharist. We need both.

My Brothers and Sisters, when we are tempted, let us always follow Jesus' example. Let our response be immediate, and clear, and let us remember the word of God, Jesus' teaching and example. And this applies to all of us, you and me.

By the way, we read that Jesus fasted in the desert for forty days. I would like to remind you that the number 40 in many instances in the Scripture did not mean precisely 4 x 10 according to the language of the time. It simply meant "many". This comes again and again in the Scriptures. "I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights. (Genesis: 7:4). Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights. (Exodus: 24:18) The Israelites ate manna in the desert forty years. Exodus: (16:35). Jesus fasted forty days and forty nights. (Matthew 4:2).

My Sisters and Brothers. May God bless you during this Lenten season, increasing in you the most wonderful gifts of grace: faith, hope, and love. Amen