



**Second Sunday of Lent – 2018
Chinese New Year Mass
Perth Catholic Chinese Community**

HOMILY

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Holy Family Church, Thelma Street, Como
Sunday 25 February 2018

Because we read the Gospels so often, at least during Mass if not at other times, it is easy for us to become so accustomed to them that we fail to appreciate just how strange and unexpected some of the gospel stories are. While this is probably true on most Sundays of the year, I think it is especially true during Lent, when we get quite a dense concentration of really remarkable stories which, if the gospel is read from beginning to end, are actually separated by many other events.

Last Sunday, for example, we heard the story of the tempting of Jesus in the desert. This is found towards the beginning of the Gospel because of course it took place immediately after Jesus's baptism in the river Jordan by John. Both the baptism and the temptation of Jesus are difficult to understand and in some ways challenge our views about who Jesus is. In relation to the baptism of Jesus we know that John's baptism was a baptism for the forgiveness of sin. It was precisely for this reason that John did not want to baptise Jesus. *"I should rather be coming to you for baptism"* John says to Jesus, but Jesus insists that he must be baptised by John. And yet we know that Jesus was, to use the words of the scriptures, like us in everything except sin. The one thing Jesus certainly did not need was to have his sins forgiven. How then do we make sense of this event? What is it trying to teach us?

The answer I think is found in the way in which John describes Jesus in the fourth Gospel; *"Look there is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"*. When Jesus goes down into the waters of the river Jordan he does not do so because of his own sins. Rather it is because he is the one who, through what he will later call in the Gospel his own baptism, that is his death, will achieve what John's baptism was pointing to: the complete victory over sin won by him but for us. The baptism of Jesus at the start of his ministry is a symbol of his real baptism, his death and resurrection, which will conclude his ministry and win eternal life for us.

It is of course this very same victory over sin, or at least over the temptation that leads to sin, which is at the heart of the story of Jesus' encounter with the devil in the desert. Here too Jesus is the one who wins the victory, but we are the ones who receive the benefit. It is as if we are being invited, as the gospel story gets under way, to see the victory over sin as a key to understanding the mystery of Jesus. This mystery will gradually unfold as the rest of the story is told, only to be made fully and finally clear with the death and resurrection of Jesus at the very end of the story.



The story of the baptism of Jesus and his defeat over Satan in the desert are linked by the voice of God the Father who proclaims, *"This is my beloved Son, my favour rests on him"*. Almost the very same words are again heard from the Father in the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus which we have heard in today's Gospel. There is one change however: this time the Father insists that the disciples, which of course today means us, should listen to Jesus.

If the story of the baptism and the temptation of Jesus comes at the beginning of the Gospel the story of the Transfiguration comes towards the end. It too is a story about the victory of Jesus over sin. This is especially clear in Saint Luke's account of the Transfiguration where we are told quite specifically that Jesus was speaking to Moses and Elijah about his forthcoming death. In a very particular way, then, the voice of the Father telling the disciples to listen to Jesus is directing them to accept what Jesus has been telling them, and will continue to tell them, over and over again about the suffering, the scandal and the sorrow that lie ahead for him, and therefore also for them. It was almost impossible for the disciples to understand that the suffering and death of Jesus were in harmony with God's plan, and that somehow that suffering and death would make possible the forgiveness of sins – and yet that is exactly what John the Baptist had said when he described Jesus as the sacrificial Lamb of God. These struggling and fragile disciples needed to have their faith strengthened, and their courage fortified, if they were going to survive the horror that awaited Jesus, and them. The glimpse of the transfigured Jesus in his glory was God's way of giving them that strength and courage.

The strangeness of the baptism of Jesus and of his temptation by the devil in the desert, and now the strangeness of this mysterious event of the Transfiguration and its reference to the passion and death of Jesus are all powerful reminders to us that God's ways are not our ways. When the first disciples responded to the invitation of Jesus to come and follow him they could never have imagined just what that following would mean for them. It is the same for us. Our decision to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, and this is what being a Catholic really means, is a decision to entrust ourselves to the Lord, as the first disciples did, and allow him to lead us forward, even when it means finding ourselves on unfamiliar and unexpected, and even frightening, roads.

This is precisely what Lent is meant to do for us. Through our deeper prayerfulness, through our self-denial and our regaining of control over our lives, and through our generous and large-hearted care for others, the Lord will be building up our resilience, our courage, and our trusting faith. As we grow in our readiness to let him take the central place in our lives we will find ourselves less surprised and unsettled by the strange twists and turns our lives sometimes take, less frightened that we may not be up to the challenge of discipleship, and more ready to keep handing everything over to God in trust. We will in other words be growing into the people we were created to be – and our Easter celebrations will mean more to us than they ever have before.