

St Mary's Concord

A Reflection for the First Sunday of Lent

This reflection is based on the homily preached by Fr Paul Crowley on the readings for the First Sunday of Lent in Year A: Genesis 2:7-9, 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

When George Lucas launched the first *Star Wars* movie, he didn't start at the beginning nor at the end. In fact, it was Episode 4 of what has now become a series of nine movies. The most recent, *The Rise of Skywalker*, is Episode 9.

The first movie simply called *Star Wars* was released in May 1977, now almost 43 years ago. But it did have a sub-title: *A New Hope*.

Star Wars is the story of the classic encounter between good and evil, between light and darkness. The first film opened with the figure of Darth Vader, who served the Dark Lord. Only later do we find out that he was once a Jedi who had turned to the dark side.

In some ways George Lucas may have been inspired by Matthew's Gospel. *Star Wars* and Matthew's Gospel share a common worldview. The world is under the power of evil forces. How they are described varies but at the heart of the story is a new hope.

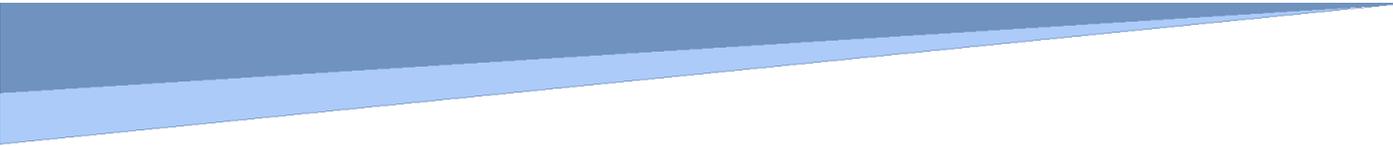
To understand this new hope, we need to go back to the beginning. To tell us about the mission of Jesus, Matthew begins by reminding us that human beings had turned to the dark side of human nature and therefore needed to be rescued. But first we need to go back to the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament.

On the first Sunday of Lent our first reading took us back to the Book of Genesis. In the early chapters it tries to answer the question: why is it so? In poetic language, the Book of Genesis described creation as a garden, a paradise, and among the trees of the garden is the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil – that is a poetic way of describing human free will.

In the story, the man and the woman, in other words of all human beings, chose to rebel against God. It is their choice and the story reminds us that evil, the dark side, does not come from God but from us.

In a very human way of telling the story, the human beings walked with God in the garden and when they rebelled, they were expelled from the garden, from the presence of God, and their world becomes the desert, a wilderness.

In the Gospels Jesus is the one who comes to bring humanity back to God. He is the one who offers new hope. In Matthew's Gospel, the Kingdom of Heaven is the name Matthew gives to this new reality, this new relationship with God. And so at the beginning of his mission, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to face the forces of the dark side.



To understand how Matthew tells the story, we need to recall that for Matthew, Jesus is the new Moses. Moses was sent by God to rescue the People of Israel from slavery in Egypt, the symbol of oppression by the forces of evil.

To achieve freedom the people had to follow Moses into the wilderness. It was a journey of 40 years, a symbolic number. In the wilderness they had to choose to put their trust in God even when they could not see a way forward.

The Book of Deuteronomy tells the story of Moses instructing the people about their need to put their trust in God. When Jesus is asked to choose which path he will follow, Matthew puts on his lips quotes from Deuteronomy.

Time and time again throughout his mission Jesus will affirm his trust in the Father and in the garden of Gethsemane he prays, Father, your will be done. We too are constantly asked to choose, to trust. Where Israel failed, Jesus remained faithful.

When they were hungry and doubted God, God sent them food, manna – a fine substance like flour to bake into bread. Jesus is tempted to turn stones into bread and he replies, “One does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

We human beings may think that we have the power to transform our physical world, our environment, to provide for all our needs but we do not live on bread alone.

Jesus is tempted to throw himself off the temple, to make God act. We sometimes expect God to work according to our timeline.

And finally, Jesus is tempted to do whatever it takes to achieve power. In *Star Wars* it is to choose the dark side. Jesus says no and in doing so he embraces the Cross, the new Tree of Life.

As we begin again our journey to Easter, we too are being asked to choose which path we will follow. We are being reminded that there are no short cuts. But we can be confident that we are not alone on the journey. In the very last scene of Matthew’s Gospel, the risen Lord sends the disciples out on their mission, or rather he sends them to continue his mission, and he says to them “Remember, I am with you always to the end of the age.”

In the language of *Star Wars*, the Force was with them.

Paul Crowley
1 March 2020