

HOMILY FOR LENT I – MARCH 6TH 2022

This first Sunday in Lent, the start of our journey towards Easter, the Church places before us the temptations of Jesus in the desert, how he handled these situations, an example to us of how we too can defeat temptations when they are placed before us

St. John of the Cross tells us: “Jesus is a rich mine with many pockets containing treasures. However deep we dig we will never find their end.”

Many temptations will go unrecognised unless we know Jesus, and to dig into the pockets of the treasures of Christ is to dig deep into the scriptures. Lent is the season to read and inwardly digest scripture each day and experience those treasures.

So, let’s take a look at what scripture tells us about our Lord’s confrontation with the devil in the wilderness, and how Jesus answers the devil’s leading questions.

Israel could remember a time in the desert when the nation’s claim to be a people of God was severely tested by many temptations. The experience of God’s people is recalled in this morning’s OT reading from the Book of Deuteronomy by the wandering Aramean in the wilderness to the exodus from Egypt and the entry into Canaan, the Promised Land.

As the Israelites were tempted in many ways, so Satan tests the Sonship of Jesus by saying three times: “If you are the Son of God...” But unlike Israel, which fell so many times to temptation, Jesus uses the word of God to defeat the powers of evil.

He says: “Man does not live by bread alone” and tells Satan “You must worship the Lord your God,” and then he extends further, “He will put his angels in charge of you to guard you....” Jesus knew that to defeat Satan the only answer was to place his trust in almighty God.

Jesus had just spent 40 days fasting in the desert, so why not use His powers to satisfy His most pressing needs? Jesus is the Son of God, why not experience the concrete protection of the Almighty and make use of His promises? For goodness sake! Jesus had come to conquer the whole world for God. Why shouldn't He do it all at once - the easy way?

Satan showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and told him that he would give our Lord authority over them if he bowed down to him. Satan was emphatic that they were already in his hands, adding that he could give overall authority to whom he wished.

To me, what is most striking is the seeming logic of the devil's temptations. The tempter's line of argument is intelligent and pragmatic. It sounds appealing. They seem so dangerously full of good sense; and are widely used in our personal world, as well as within the world of conflict and commerce today.

However, Jesus steps outside this whole conflict with Satan, and against each suggestion made by the tempter He sets the word of God.

He refuses to get involved with that kind of logic that leaves out divine revelation. He steps back from the proposals and compares them, not with His own personal inclinations and desires, but with the word of God. He allows the word of God to pass judgement on the value of the proposals.

When Jesus was tempted, He didn't decide to reason logically like we would tend to do, weighing up the pros and cons. Instead He let God's word judge the suggestions of the tempter and, by doing this, He gets a very different set of results.

At the end of Jesus' time with Satan, the Gospel writer, St. Luke, simply states: "And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time." St Luke had no doubt that Jesus would be tempted again, just as we are, throughout our lives.

We can now understand that Jesus, by not succumbing to the tempter's rational logic, is ushered into a different world. He isn't imprisoned in the material world, but remains faithful to God's word.

It means that His acceptance of dependence on God will give Him a liberty which can be possessed by everyone, by everyone who is willing to listen and to act on the words of God.

Temptations have persuasive powers, the effects they produce can be disastrous and we see this everyday illustrated for us on the TV news.

How Jesus handled the problem, clearly indicates the way we should handle them if we wish to live in accordance with God's teachings.

We must realise that the conflicts experienced by Jesus are also the conflicts we will all experience, and likely more keenly during Lent than during any other time of the year. Satan likes to pick his time.

It is a time when we should reflect on the temptations we have experienced in the year past, how we handled them and how best we should react to similar, or new, temptations in the future.

St. Paul in today's letter to the Romans tells us: "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is the Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, then you will be saved. No-one who believes in him will be put to shame..." For everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved..."

Although we might be in a better position to resist the easy solution to our complex and material problems because we have Jesus' example and the Holy Spirit to help us, the conflicts surrounding our patterns of conduct are often very difficult to assess. Our conflicts are often a complex mix of good and evil and, at times, are extremely difficult to unravel.

If we look at our Lenten penance, it will only be complete and definitive if we have constant recourse to God's word, to God's teaching, which transcends all logic. If we fully equip ourselves with the understanding of God's word, we can be fully assured of being effectually led to true harmony for the coming year.

To trust in God isn't to trust that God will adapt to OUR demands. Rather, it is to live our lives simply and honestly, waiting on God and obeying God's will, trusting him on HIS terms and not on our own.

Assured of God's love we are also to be alert to the ways we may tend to deceive ourselves. For example, to be tempted to leave everything to God and wash our hands of responsibility. Jesus teaches us to be careful and emphasises the need for a listening heart that waits on God and acts only on God's inspiration.

Jesus saw clearly that if he produced sensations he could become a 9-day wonder; and that sense of sensationalism would never last. He knew the way of service and suffering leads to the cross and after that to the crown.

St. Luke is actually preparing us for the victory which Jesus will eventually win on the cross. After the victory won in the desert he presents Jesus' public ministry as victoriously challenging the powers of darkness and establishing God's reign on Earth.

St. Luke doesn't let us overlook the humanity that Jesus shares with us. This will become starkly manifest when the "opportune time" comes, as Satan promised, when he enters into Judas and the power of darkness has its hour.