

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Gospel: Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

RELFECTION 1:

THE SECOND TEMPTATION

The movie 'Cast Away' is a story of solitude that begins when a plane crashes in the ocean and the sole survivor is washed up on an uninhabited island. He learns how to make fire and he finds fresh water in a cave, but solitude is a different matter. Like Jesus he is alone in the desert with no resources. But he finds a listener and a much-needed companion as he paints a face on a football and names it 'Wilson'. Eventually he builds a raft, escapes from the island and is picked up by a passing ship. But for Jesus this is not a movie story with a happy ending, there's no smiley-faced football to talk to, only a sinister encounter with Satan. Despite his barren predicament, Jesus prevails and Satan leaves him. Then an angel comes to Jesus and waits on him.

We have already seen how there were certain great milestones in the life of Jesus and here is one of the greatest. In the Temple when he was twelve the realisation had come that God was his Father in a unique way. In the emergence of John the Baptist, the hour had struck and at his baptism God's approval had come. At this time Jesus was about to begin his campaign. Before beginning a campaign a leader must choose the methods to be employed. The temptation story shows us Jesus choosing once and for all the method by which he prepared to win men and women over to God. He shows him rejecting the way of power and glory and accepting the way of suffering and the cross.

The Gospel today is the most sacred of narratives for it can come from no other source than from Jesus' own lips. At some time he must himself have told his disciples about this most intimate experience of his soul. Even at this time Jesus must have been conscious of quite exceptional powers. The whole point of the temptations is that they could come only to a man who could do outstanding things. It is no temptation to us to turn stones into bread or leap from a temple pinnacle. These are the temptations that could only have come to a man whose power was unique and who had to decide how to use that power.

Let us now think of the scene. Between the inhabited part of Palestine and the Dead Sea stretched a terrible wilderness. It was called 'Jeshimmon' which means the devastation. Precipices more than 1,200 feet high plunged down to the Dead Sea. This is where Jesus was tempted. It was a long battle and the struggle ends with the saying that 'the tempter left Jesus for a season'. For today let me concentrate briefly on the second temptation for I feel it has a special message for our times. So, let us remind

ourselves what it was about. "The devil took Jesus up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a single instant and said 'I shall give you all this power and glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I may give it to whoever I wish. All this will be yours if you worship me'".

During the time of Jesus' ministry, the people's idea of a messiah was rooted in power and glory and that is how they expected salvation to be accomplished. According to this plan, a special god-chosen person would arise, defeat the Romans and liberate the Holy Land from all oppression. He would achieve this ambition by being more powerful than the Roman army. Jesus' response shows us a different plan; 'you shall worship Yahweh, your God and him alone shall you serve'. God has a passion for freedom, but God has devised a different way to achieve it. The devil's power and glory will bring temporary freedom for some people on some occasions, but the means it employs brings death and destruction in its path.

We need only reflect on the Christian crusades. Some of them freed the Holy Land for a short period of time for a limited number of people, but this never achieved lasting freedom for all. Jesus was convinced that people who were committed to weakness, not power, could only accomplish true freedom; the weakness that comes from giving ourselves to others, not dominating them. We ask today would the Holy Land be a more peaceful place if the crusaders had loved the Saracens instead of killing them. History has many unanswered questions. It's always easier to defeat your enemy by force than win them over with love.

Thomas Carlyle said 'The Christian must be consumed by the conviction of the infinite beauty of holiness and the infinite damnability of sin'.

REFLECTION 2: INTO THE DESERT

Six years ago this week, Pope Benedict XVI announced his resignation as Bishop of Rome and Pope. The event set the barque of Peter off into uncharted waters. With the election of Pope Francis, the church began to look at itself in fresh ways, returning to Gospel roots and the renewal begun by the 2nd Vatican Council.

In the readings for the 1st Sunday of Lent, we are moved to reflect on our own lives to find the truth of who we are and how we must cooperate with the Spirit to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth. Most of us live on autopilot, seldom thinking about our larger purpose. But there are times when we experience a heightened awareness of who we are, where we are going and how to get there. There are times when even the church lost its way, turning in on itself, more concerned with rules and regulations and failing to make known the good news to all - more like a monarchy or a business than a faith community - the simplicity of Jesus' heralding of God's mercy had faded from view.

Israel seemed on a similar drift when Jesus appeared. He faced great opposition when he tried to announce the good news. In the end he surrendered his life on the cross in order to complete his mission to make known God's mercy by his suffering, death and resurrection. During his public ministry, Jesus shocked many people by identifying with public sinners, the poor, the outcasts and the sick. Jesus openly joined those who had come to the Jordan for repentance and remission of sin. He wanted to show that the reign of God excluded no one. So he took his place among the crowds searching for God's mercy.

In today's Gospel (Luke 4: 1-13) Jesus followed the lead of the Spirit by submitting to personal purification and testing - going out into the Judean wilderness to fast for 40 days. After this comes an encounter with Satan, who tempts him in every way possible, hoping to seduce him into following his own guidance and power. Jesus emerges as God's suffering servant rather than the powerful Messiah. 2000 years later, the followers of Jesus are still called to be servant-evangelists. Pope Francis reminds us that the Gospel brings joy to our hearts. He also shows us in his own life how to 'back up and turn around'. Papal biographers tell us that at one time in Argentina, Francis was a bit of a dictator and autocratic. Even as a priest and Jesuit Provincial he re-discovered Jesus' message from the layers of legalism, pomp and privilege that so easily infects people when they become powerful. Pope Francis, like Jesus, has identified with the lowliest of God's people and those most in need. He has entered the desert of simplicity and poverty in his lifestyle, public gestures and actions. Like Jesus in the wilderness, he has avoided the temptation that can isolate leaders in high office. This allows him to be free to share the joy that comes from being a servant. This season of Lent invites us to simplify our lives and identify with what is most basic and always, always to be kind to those we encounter daily. If we listen deeply, the Spirit will lead us to the desert, not to overeat, but to pray and face our own temptations. Only then will we be prepared to follow Jesus all the way to Jerusalem.