

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Gospel: Matthew 4:1-11

Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, *One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, *He will command his angels concerning you, and On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.*" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, *Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, *Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.*" Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

REFLECTION 1: FACING OUR DEMONS

Today we meet Jesus as he enters into the wilderness. There the forces of evil test him. For the people of Biblical times, the desert has great symbolism. It reminded them of the day of the Exodus from Egypt; the days when their ancestors wandered across the Sinai Peninsula heading for the Promised Land. For the people of Israel, the desert was their time of testing and as they trekked through the barren wasteland, they began to hanker after the fleshpots of Egypt. But the desert wasn't only a place of testing, it was also a place of new beginnings, the vantage point for a fresh start. Later they would look back over those days with a certain nostalgia. These were the days when things appeared clear, the days when they were a new and free people, full of hope.

So also in the life of Jesus, it was a time of testing and fresh beginnings, as he faced into the wilderness of Judea for 40 days of prayer and fasting. At the time of the Exodus, the sons and daughters of Israel were tested and found wanting. Now the Son of God will be tested and he will not fail. The Evangelist Matthew in today's Gospel presents the testing of Jesus in 3 stages, a reminder of Israel's testing for 40 years. Here this testing or temptation presents Jesus with an opportunity to use his divine power to convert stones into bread. It reminds us of the gift of manna in the wilderness. Jesus could have become a social and political Messiah by turning stones into bread and so be readily acclaimed by the hungry and needy. Jesus' saving mission would provide more than food that would nourish for the moment. In the end he would offer himself and his teaching as the bread that would give life to the world.

In the second test, the tempter approached Jesus to see if he would prove his presence as the Son of God, by dramatic action, melodrama – by throwing himself down from the top of the Temple without hurt! Finally, Jesus is taken like a prospective buyer to a high mountain. If only he would bend his allegiance to Satan, then he would have an easy victory – be in control of the universe and the events that might unfold. He could bring about an easy salvation for all without undergoing the agony of the Cross. These are the kinds of tests presented to Jesus and in a certain sense to all of us. But in each case, Jesus responds, not by giving in to the seductions of Satan, but by warding off temptation by the use of God's word.

*Lord Jesus, give me a steadfast heart,
which no hardship can wear out.*

*Give me also O Lord, understanding to know you.
If I am tempted to sin, keep watch within and save me from wrong. Amen.*

REFLECTION 2:

PRUNING TIME

There is one aspect of gardening that most gardeners find difficult - the job of pruning fruit trees. And yet if pruning is neglected the results can be very disappointing. Pruning time is a painful time for a fruit tree. The pruner rids it of all those suckers which use up a lot of energy but produce no fruit. However, the aim of this surgery is not to inflict pain, but to help the tree to produce more and better fruit. Lent is a kind of spiritual pruning time. There is much that is useless and perhaps harmful in our lives which saps our energy and diminishes our spiritual fruitfulness. We ask the question... 'of what shall we proud ourselves this Lent so that we may become more fruitful branches of Christ, the true Vine?'

Maybe this story may help us to answer that question. Once upon a time there were three shepherds who each was responsible for a flock of sheep. One winter's night all three were awakened by the howling of a wolf. The first was about to get up when he heard the rain beating against the bedroom window. He had second thoughts, turned over in bed and went back to sleep. The second shepherd got out of bed, dressed and went to the front door. However, on opening it he was hit by a squall of sleety rain - so he went back inside and returned to his warm bed. The third shepherd got up, dressed and ventured outside where he had to contend with wind, darkness and cold. When he got back indoors he was wet through and developed a nasty cold as a result of his efforts. Now which of the three shepherds knew most about the rain, the wind and the dark? The third of course.

It's the same with temptation - those who give in easily to temptation know little about the struggle involved. Those who struggle with temptations and overcome them know them best. If you want to know what victory over temptation costs, ask a saint. It was because Jesus struggled with temptation and was victorious over it that he can help us in our struggles with temptation. If you want to give up tobacco or drink, look for someone who has tried and succeeded.

Temptation for Jesus meant the same as it meant for Adam and Eve and as it also means for us. It meant choosing between good and evil, between doing God's will or one's own will. Jesus was tempted right through his whole life. His victory in the desert was not the winning of the war, but merely the winning off a battle. We can't hope to escape temptation; temptation is the struggle between the passions of the flesh and the longings of the spirit. It is not something to be ashamed of - our destiny isn't simply never to fall, but having fallen, to rise again. Temptation is not necessarily a bad thing, but by forcing us to choose good over evil it makes us strong. Virtue would become meaningless if there was no evil, no struggle. The battle against evil is never over as long as we are on our planet Earth. However, each right choice makes the next right choice that much easier. Jesus victory wasn't easy. It was achieved through prayer, fasting and reflection on the will of the heavenly Father with the help of the Holy Spirit. He is with us also in our struggles. It is a great consolation this Lent to consider in our hearts that God is not outside our struggles but is with us during them.