

1st Sunday of Lent – Sermon

As we know, we began the Holy Season of Lent with the Ash Wednesday Masses this past week, and today is the First Sunday of Lent. The Word Lent is derived from an Anglo-Saxon word that means ‘Spring’, and it is associated with the northern hemisphere’s seasonal change from winter to spring. While here in the southern hemisphere, we are moving very slowly into Autumn, our northern neighbours are moving into Spring from their Winter.

Given the Church’s history and growth in the Northern Hemisphere, the church’s liturgical seasons also reflect more of the natural and cultural aspects of the North. Nevertheless, as the body of Christ, it is good to be on the same page Spiritually, as the whole Church both in the North and the South have begun this Holy Season of Lent, a Spiritual Springtime, Renewal, and Revival through Lenten Practices of Prayer, Fasting, and Almsgiving. Just as Spring is a time of new growth after the cold season of winter, the season of Lent every year promises new growth and new life.

The Gospel Today from Luke describes how Jesus himself fasted and prayed in the desert preparing himself for his mission ahead. Jesus was tempted by the Devil in the wilderness, however, these temptations experienced by our Lord were not temptations to moral evil as we usually understand it, but they were far more subtle: the type of temptations that come to committed Christians rather than unbelievers, who do not believe in God, but live in moral and mortal sin day in and day out. Jesus was not tempted to steal, murder, commit adultery, lie, and so on in the wilderness. His temptations were way more subtle. These are the temptations that each one of us would face more often as committed disciples of Jesus Christ who practice our faith regularly. So what are these subtle temptations of Jesus, that we too experience?

The first temptation was to turn a stone into a loaf. We read in the scriptures Jesus ate nothing for the 40 days and at the end he was hungry, I bet he was starved if that was true. It is reported and believed by Franciscans that St Francis himself, so refrained from eating out of reverence for the fasting of the blessed Christ, who fasted forty days and forty nights without taking eating, however, Francis fasted on half a loaf to make sure he did not equal Christ's fast, and be puffed up with Vainglory for equalling Christ's fast. So, 40 days on half a loaf, for St. Francis and 40 days without any food for Christ. I am not suggesting we try to imitate Christ or St Francis with these die-hard fasts, even though we need to fast in appropriate ways that we can manage.

Food is a basic necessity of life, so why shouldn't Jesus turn stones into bread in a similar way he changed water into wine? Was he tempted at the wedding in Cana by the blessed Virgin Mary to turn water into wine, if it is a temptation to turn a stone into a loaf after fasting for 40 days and 40 nights? What is the temptation here, what is he resisting? **Jesus is resisting using 'his power to help himself'**, he is resisting giving priority to personal material comfort over the spiritual aspects, **Jesus is refusing to justify self-sufficiency as he reminds the Devil of the scripture 'Man does not live bread alone' but on every Word that comes from the Mouth of God.**

This is a very common temptation that we all face every day, in our postmodern, affluent Western Culture. More and more people live as they do not need God or his Word anymore, they are self-sufficient as they concentrate on the material world alone. The great heresy of our times is of course Materialism. We can easily fall into this temptation in our daily lives, living as if we do not need God or his Word. Thus, Lent is a time to remind ourselves that we do not live on the matter alone, we are spiritual beings on a material journey, as much as we are material beings on a spiritual journey. Man does not live on Bread alone. Fasting

is a way to pray with our bodies. When we fast we are telling God that we need Him and his Spirit and his Word to live. By refusing some basic human comfort, whether it be food or drink or anything else, we are acknowledging that we are more than the physical, that we have an eternal soul that needs to be nourished by every Word that comes from the Mouth of God. This is the first temptation.

Next, Jesus is taken up to a height by the Devil and he shows him in a moment, all the kingdoms of the world. He is promised all the power and the glory of these kingdoms since it is committed to the devil and he could give it to whom he pleases. What is the subtle nature of this temptation? The subtleness of this temptation is in the true nature and purpose of power and the misuse of it.

Jesus is King and Lord of all so why not make that happen immediately? After all, God is all-powerful, isn't he? We profess in an Almighty God, don't we? So power can't be bad in itself if God is powerful.

Human beings crave Power. Period. No explanation is necessary. Human beings crave Power and desire to be powerful. If God is Almighty and powerful and we are made in the image and likeness of God, it only makes sense that human beings have a strong desire for power.

However, given our fallen sinful nature, with our disobedience to God, the gift of power and authority is misunderstood, misused, and even abused. God uses his power to create, to heal, to save, and to give life; not to destroy, or to rule over his creation or for the thrill of being powerful. This was the temptation of Lucifer himself, he was a very powerful angel but wanted to be God himself. According to traditional Christian beliefs, his rebellion against God stemmed from a desire to be equal to or even replace God on the throne, seeking ultimate power and authority over creation. Now he tempts the Son of God to do the same, to be all-powerful in himself and refuse to Worship God his Father!

None of us is shielded against this temptation to misuse power, both lay and the clergy alike. There is a psychological thrill in exercising power over someone or over something. Both secular and church history are full of examples of people who have abused their power; the more power one exercises, the more psychological pleasure it, thus we have had Kings, Queens, Presidents, Prime Ministers, and Emperors who have craved endless power, throughout history.

Power is given to us to serve, to heal, to love, to create. Power is a good thing in itself, if used well we cooperate with the power and grace of God to serve and love others instead of harm them. Jesus replies to Satan at the end of this temptation of this truth **“You must worship the Lord your God, and serve him alone”, to serve God is to love and serve our neighbour.**

Finally, the third temptation. Jesus is made to stand on the parapet of the Temple, and asked to throw himself down from there, for the scripture says: *“He will put his angels in charge of you to guard you and again They will hold you up on their hands, in case you hurt your foot against a stone”*

Given Jesus rebuked the previous two temptations with Scripture, now the Devil uses Sacred Scripture to tempt Jesus. Many people have gone the wrong way after being tempted in this way by the Devil. The Devil knows his bible, If we only know half of our bible, and refuse to submit to the teachings of the Church we are in trouble. But what is the temptation here? Surely God wants to protect his Son, so why shouldn't angels come to his aid? Jesus replies to Satan saying **“It has been said: that you must not put the Lord your God to the test”.** **What is to put the Lord to the test?** It is yet another subtle temptation.

In Jesus's situation, he was tempted to launch his messianic mission with a great spectacle of divine power and majesty. Imagine Jesus jumping from the

parapet of the Temple and the angles carrying him down. Even the Pharisees would have seen the glory of God and believed in Christ. It is the temptation to take the easy path, the wide road, and to avoid the narrow path that God plans for us. We would prefer to tell God how it could be done better in various situations. “God why don’t you do this or help me do that, things would work out so well if only we did this my way” This is a very common temptation we all face daily. Jesus, however, resists such a test of God.

He rejects the easy way to be the Messiah, he follows his Father’s path, and he uses his power only to heal, to save, to deliver, not to do magic or spectacles to make people believe in him. What he will experience in Jerusalem will be rejection, shame, and humiliation. But God will indeed “bear him up”: raising him from the dead and making him “Lord of all” at the right moment.

As noted, these three temptations, then, are subtle. Like all temptations to which people, otherwise basically virtuous, are vulnerable, they come under the guise of good. **The temptations make us doubt our true identity in God, just as the devil attempted to make Jesus doubt his identity as the Son of God.** Two times the Devil started the temptations by saying “**If you are the Son of God...**” We are Sons and Daughters of God, our Almighty Father. We are made for Greatness in God. We are gifted and empowered in many ways to serve and to love. The Glory of God is Man/Woman fully alive. So let us enter deeply into this Spiritual Springtime of Lent and follow our Saviour’s footsteps in resisting these subtle temptations of the Devil, who comes to steal, kill, and destroy. Come Holy Spirit, give us the wisdom to discern our paths into the heart of God this Lent. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.