

Temptation

First Sunday in Lent

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As is the custom, our first Sunday in Lent has as its Gospel reading the story of the temptation of Jesus. The story of Jesus' temptation comes in the Gospel accounts immediately following his Baptism and takes place in the Wilderness. After his baptism and before beginning his ministry, Jesus goes into the wilderness to commune with God and himself. The Wilderness is a place of emptiness and desolation. It is seemingly lifeless and godless, yet it is to this world that generations of Christians have retired to spiritual growth. The harsh desert light puts everything into a different perspective. Somehow the natural focus is on the inner self, the inner life.

So from our context, we understand that this story is about Jesus and his ministry, which we now know was to lead to his death on the Cross. The ministry would ultimately lead to the liberation of those captive to sin and under Satan's power. The ministry that would bring about the kingdom of God.

As he contemplated his future path and ministry, it was here that Jesus was to encounter the devil in all his wiles. Jesus knew his destiny and that he would rule the nations and usher in the kingdom of God, but this would come at a price, a ransom, which was the cross itself. These three temptations are about diverting Jesus from his mission. The devil came and tempted him to find the easier way, a less costly way. He tried to distract him from the path he would walk to gain the prize without the cross.

Jesus would achieve what he set out to do: rule the nations, but Jesus would not defeat Satan. The devil would remain in control, and humanity would stay bound by the penalty of sin.

Each of these three temptations asks Jesus to use his superhuman power to obtain followers rather than through the cross

Jesus was asked to prove himself

- by turning stones into bread, and
- by submitting to the devil himself, and
- by leaping from the temple.

These are symbolic of the three other paths that he could choose:

To make bread from stones was to gain the loyalty of his followers because of what he could give them by meeting their physical needs.

To leap from the temple pinnacle would gain followers through what Jesus could do, the spectacular miracle, the demonstration of divine power.

To bow to the devil was to use the political system to manipulate and control. The followers would follow as part of the political machine, part of the revolution. Being bound to the devil (because of sin), they would have to give loyalty to whom they chose, to his agent. Jesus would draw followers in each way, but this would be without the Cross, and Satan could remain in control.

Before we look at how to apply this text to ourselves, here are a couple of other points that ought to be made.

First, we must note that this was one of many times he was tested. John's Gospel tells us that after feeding 5,000, many would see him made king. But for the wrong reasons. His followers saw him as a potential army leader that could overthrow the ruling Romans. They wanted him to rule because he could provide for them. Similarly, he was often challenged to demonstrate his divinity by performing a miracle on request, on demand so that the onlookers might believe.

Also, it is interesting to note that in the first temptation, Jesus was challenged to use his divine powers for himself. In the second, he was asked to do what was the opposite of his intended activity, and in the third, Scripture was used or misused to tempt him.

Jesus faced the temptations with a clear understanding of Scripture, countering each with the word of life and countering with his understanding of God's great plan contained within.

Finally, we should note that the result of temptation resisted was strength. Temptation is part of being human. It is part of the divine free choice. We can only be tempted if we can choose to do wrong. This is what makes us human, this ability to choose right from wrong. But this story is not just an interesting anecdote in the life of Jesus. It is part of the living word - holy Scripture, which still speaks today, that we might read, mark, learn and inwardly digest its message.

It is not only about the temptations tried against Jesus, but the everyday temptations we face as we are his Body in the world. We may be tempted to preach a cross-less faith, obtain followers, and follow ourselves easily.

We may be tempted to use the message about what you can get (or what you may avoid) if you follow Christ. We have all heard a preacher or an evangelist say: Come forward or rot in hell. (Usually, the message is a little more subtle). And we can respond to that message with fear and the motive of what is in it for me!

Or we may seek to use political structures to bring about the kingdom. History is littered with examples of the conversion of the nation with the conversion of the king or the conquering by the Christian power. The church is the establishment and the establishment the church, and we belong because not to belong is treason!

Or third, we can place our faith in demonstrations of Power. In the miracle ministry, we see an active God and put our faith in the experience. Faith is in believing what we don't see! We have all heard the testimony of those who follow because of the miracle, but those who remember the story of Joni Erickson Tada will remember that the challenge for her was to believe when the miracle did not come.

The temptations also warn us that we might not play our part in the establishment of the Kingdom. We want people to follow our Lord because of who he is and not because of what he can do, because of his divine power, or because we are structurally compelled.

As we prepare our strategies to reach our district, we must ensure we are not tempted to take the easy way. One thing that sticks in my mind from the WEC College was a quote from C.T. Studd - If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then there is no greater sacrifice that I can make.

Let us Journey with Jesus into this Lent's wilderness and look at our individual motives for following him—power, Structure or Gain. If we have fallen into this trap, let us repent and ask God to show us the way of the cross and to give us the courage to follow it.

AMEN