

1st Sunday Lent Year "C"

February 14, 2016

Readings: Deuteronomy 26: 4-10; Romans 10: 8-13; Luke 4:1-13

The readings for this first Sunday of Lent focus on the account of Jesus' temptation by the devil in the desert. It is the classic biblical scene of Good vs. Evil outside of the Garden of Eden. It is so clear-cut what is going on. It contains so many elements and facets of the nature of temptation, any of which could be our own experience. In other words, it is not really too much of a stretch for us to see in these temptations a mirror of our own lives.

Temptation is a fact of life and one that cannot easily be dealt with in our modern age, or in any age. The thought that we can avoid temptation in all its forms is not only naïve, it is quite unbiblical, for even our Lord was tempted.

I recall when six years ago a very well known professional athlete made a public apology following the revelations of his many marital infidelities. That in itself was noteworthy, but the most telling of all were these words: "I stopped living by the core values that I was taught to believe in... I knew my actions were wrong, but I convinced myself that normal rules didn't apply... I felt that I had worked hard my entire life and deserved to enjoy all the temptations around me. I felt I was entitled."¹

In fact, the etiology of sin works this way. Somehow, either the rules do not apply to us, or as is more likely the case, the rules are too difficult and so we stop trying to live by them. In the first case, the rules are rejected out of hand; in the other, the weight of living up to them is too heavy, so without actually rejecting them, we give ourselves a free pass.

¹ Tiger Woods, 19 February 2010.

At its core, sin is an act of selfishness, and like the athlete whom I mentioned earlier, we usually know it. Those with well-formed consciences, even if they stray, know this in their hearts. It is an act of putting our desires above that anything else, and all else.

In the moment, we see a sinful act as good, and I mean that in the philosophical sense...it is that which we pursue. All agents act for the good. Even the bank robber, in the moment of his act, think that there is a “good” to be pursued, namely the acquisition of money. Maybe it is feeding a bad drug habit, but at the precise moment the agent acts contrary to the moral and natural law, violating the rights of another.

In the moment, the Devil weakens the will of the human person so that we make decisions, even ones contrary to our better judgment. He does so by making the sin attractive, tasty, too powerful to resist. So, what is the solution? We need a powerful life of prayer preceded by a fundamental commitment to the belief that we are receivers of truth and not arbiters of it.

The Truth is received in humility and embraced as a gift, not a burden. To reduce Catholicism or Christianity to a set of rules is to completely miss its beauty, goodness and truth as well as its Divine origin. We are most free when we embrace our limitations and yes, even our weaknesses.

The Sacrament of Penance is an indispensable antidote to the harm caused to our soul by sin. It is the soothing balm of God’s Love, mediated through the ministry of the Church in that most private sanctuary of the confessional. We do not require public confession in the Church, even if it had some history, especially in monasteries, where monks lived in such close quarters.

In the middle of the Fifth century, Pope Leo the Great clarified:

“An abuse has crept in which requires that the faithful write out their individual sins in a little book which is then to be read out loud to the public...All that is necessary, however, is for the sinner to manifest his conscience in a secret confession to the priests alone.”²

He went on to note that it this sufficiency is based upon the fact that the priest “acts as an intercessor for the transgressions of the penitents.” Grazie mille, Pope Leo! How many of us would want public confession?

But perhaps what is most troubling about the whole account of the temptation of Jesus is left for the final line; it is almost a throw away line, easy to slip past us. The good ending is tempered by simply recounting, “when the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him for a time.” It isn’t over, it will happen again. We have been given fair warning. We are going to have to deal with temptation of one sort or another for a long, long time to come. Oh, the nature of the temptation will change with age, but its reality will continue.

We must remember that we have the tools necessary to shun the temptations of the evil one, if only we use them. We are not slaves to evil; we are not powerless against it. The blood of the Cross has washed us clean and gives us the strength to carry on. As we begin this year’s Lenten journey through the desert of our own weaknesses, if we but follow the path to the glory of the Cross, therein we will find the grace necessary to refresh and renew our thirst. Let us support one another in this journey, together, following the path set out for us by our Lord, leading us to our true and eternal home.

² Pope Leo I (the Great), *Magna indignatione*, March 6, 459.