



First Sunday of Lent February 14, 2016 C

The Three Temptations of Jesus and Their Application to Our Lives

The following two reflections on the temptation of Jesus are by Fr. Flor McCarthy, S.D.B.

Reflection #1

The first temptation was to turn stones into bread. Besides the obvious meaning, the word “bread” can mean material things in general. The devil was telling Jesus to use his special powers to give the people all the material things they could possibly want. But Jesus knew that material things by themselves will never satisfy people. His chief task was to nourish their minds and hearts with the word of God.

This was the temptation to give people what they want rather than what they need. The temptation to please the crowd by giving them what will satisfy their immediate wants, when they don't know what they really need.

We have deeper hungers and greater needs. What does the heart really hunger for? It's certainly not bread. Bread is what the body hungers for. After the miracle of the loaves and fishes, the people came back the next day looking for more bread. But Jesus refused to give it to them. He said, “Do not work for food that cannot last, but work for the food that endures to eternal life.”

For a spiritual teacher, the food of the spirit has to take priority over the food of the body. To give priority to our physical needs would mean to diminish us, to treat us as no higher than a beast. We too are tempted to live for material things alone. It's not that we deny the spiritual, but that we neglect it.

The second temptation was to set up a political kingdom, to resort to power rather than love. Power offers an easy substitute for the hard work love can call for. It's easier to control people than to love them, easier to dominate people than to become their servant. Jesus didn't come to rule but to serve. He didn't cling to his divine power, but emptied himself and became the loving servant of all. We are always tempted to replace love by power.

The third temptation consisted in doing something spectacular (throwing himself off the Temple) in order

to elicit faith—much like a magician might elicit belief in his arts by doing some showy stunts. The idea was attractive. A stunt like that would have made him the talk of Jerusalem. But sensationalism redounds to one's glory, rather than to the glory of God. Jesus refused to jump. He didn't want screaming fans. He wanted followers, that is, people who would imitate his way of living....

Throughout his public ministry, Jesus refused to give the people these signs, even when pressed to do so. These kinds of things are not helpful. They do not demand the best of us. They cheapen faith. Faith is not magic. Holiness consists, not in trying to get God to do our will, but in trying to get ourselves to do God's will.

The temptations were attacks on all that was fundamental to the mission of Jesus. Yes, he had come to set up a kingdom, but not the kind of kingdom Satan was proposing. And he rejected the temptation to achieve the kingdom by worldly means.

All three temptations come down to the same thing in the end: to put material things and his own glory first, and spiritual things and God second, if at all. These are the major temptations of his Church as a whole, and of each of us who are its members. We have to keep our eyes on the One who refused to turn stones into bread, to jump from great heights, and to rule with great power.

The experience helped Jesus to clarify in his own mind what his mission was and how to achieve it. And once he knew what his mission was, he resolved to make a complete gift of himself to it.

The temptations were no once-off affair. Temptations are never over. They return at opportune times. Temptations continued through Jesus' life as the tempter sought in vain to undermine his mission. Even as he hung on the cross we hear an echo of the second temptation: “If he is the Messiah, let him come down from the cross, and we will believe in him.”

All those who are struggling to live a good life can take heart. Resisting temptation was not easy for Jesus; nor will it be for us. But in Jesus we have a brother who knows what we are up against. He forgives us and raises us up when we fall. He enables us to obey God's word, to trust him, and to worship him alone.

Reflection #2

NOT ON BREAD ALONE

A human being doesn't live on bread alone. Bread is only one of the basic staples of life—life for the body. To nourish a human person is not the same as to fatten cattle. Our bodies need food. But so do our souls. Our souls are craving for nourishment. The story of Elvis Presley powerfully illustrates the truth of this.

Elvis became very rich. He owned eight cars, six motorbikes, two planes, sixteen television sets, a vast mansion, and several bulging bank accounts. On top of all that, he was idolized by legions of fans. Yet he wasn't happy. In the midst of all his wealth and success, he experienced a spiritual malaise, and complained of loneliness and boredom.

"Money brings a lot of headaches," he confided to an interviewer. His mother was worried about him. She never wanted all this for him. She simply wanted him to come home, buy a furniture store, get married and have children.

He grew fearful and depressed. At the age of twenty-two he found that there were no more worlds to conquer. This malaise could have been an opportunity. It was a stark reminder that 'man doesn't live on bread alone,' that is, on material things alone.

This message rings out loud and clear in today's Gospel. It is a vital message, and is perhaps more relevant today than ever before. Though we can see its truth, in practice it is not easy to take it on board. We don't live on bread alone—at least not if we want to be fully alive, and fully nourished as human beings and children of God. What else do we need? We need the word of God.

Imagine parents who fed their child but never spoke a word to that child. No guidance, no encouragement, no affirmation, no consolation. Never a word to communicate peace and welcome, or love and joy. The child's body would be nourished, but its heart and soul would be empty. We are God's children. We need to hear God's word.

Bread alone won't always guarantee even physical survival. The poet Irina Ratushinkaya spent some time in prison (as a political prisoner) in communist Russia. She said, "Many women had more bread than I had, yet they died." What was it that kept her alive? She had no doubt what it was. It was her Christian faith.

It's not just the human body that gets hungry. The human heart and human spirit get hungry too. Until we acknowledge and address the hunger of the heart and the spirit, we will always be undernourished.

Jesus challenges us to address our deeper hungers and greater needs. What does the heart really hunger for? It's certainly not bread. It hungers for the food that

doesn't perish—the word of God. The word of God has the power to nourish us. It nourishes us with the bread of meaning, the bread of hope and, above all, the bread of love.

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TAKING TIME OUT FOR SOLITUDE

Jesus spent forty days in the desert, reflecting and praying. The desert may be a harsh place, but it's an ideal place for reflection and prayer.

This desert experience came at a crucial moment in the life of Jesus, a time of great awakening. It would be impossible to exaggerate its importance for him. As a result, he grew to love solitude, and made a habit of seeking it at difficult moments in his life. When people and events threatened to engulf him, he would steal off to a lonely place to recover and rededicate himself to the Father. What he was doing was deepening this first desert experience. We too need a quiet place for reflection. Often we live foolishly and unspiritually, driven on by stupid desires and imprisoned by selfish habits. We are surrounded by noise and constant activity. We get our priorities wrong. We are unable or unwilling to be alone, to be silent, to be still. And we wonder why we aren't happy, why we don't find it easy to get on with others, and why we can't pray.

We need solitude. In solitude we begin to stand on our own feet before God and the world, and accept full responsibility for our own lives. The hermit goes into the desert, not to lose himself, but to find himself. In solitude we meet our demons, our addictions, our lust, our anger, and our need for recognition and approval.

And we don't go into the wilderness to escape from others, but to find them in God. "Only in solitude and silence can I find the gentleness with which I can love my brothers and sisters" (Thomas Merton).

Anne Morrow Lindbergh writes:

*For a full day and two nights I have been alone.
I lay on the beach under the stars at night alone.
I made my breakfast alone.*

*Alone I watched the gulls at the end of the pier,
dip and wheel and dive for scraps I threw them.*

*I felt closer to my people, too, even in my solitude.
For it is not physical solitude that totally separates
one from other people, not physical isolation,
but spiritual isolation.*

*It is not the desert island nor the stony wilderness
that cuts you from the people you love.*

*It is the wilderness in the mind,
the desert wastes in the heart
through which one wanders lost and a stranger.
When one is a stranger to oneself
then one is estranged from others, too.*

*Only when one is connected to one's own care,
is one connected to others, I am beginning to discover.
And, for me the care, the inner spring,
can best be refound through solitude.*

The American writer, Henry Thoreau, who lived for two years in the woods, said: *"I went into the woods to confront the essential facts of life, lest when I come to die I should discover that I had not lived."*

Have a blessed week,

Le Saran