



First Sunday of Lent February 21, 2010 C

REFLECTIONS ON THE TEMPTATIONS OF JESUS AND OUR TEMPTATIONS

The following are some miscellaneous reflections on Luke's version of Jesus' temptation.

Scripture scholar, Fred Craddock writes:

If anyone is having trouble believing that Jesus was really tempted, then he or she needs to keep in mind that temptation is an indication of strength, not of weakness. We are not tempted to do what we cannot do but what is within our power. The greater the strength, the greater the temptation. How fierce must have been Jesus' battle! And very real; this is no cartoon with pitchforks, red suits, and horns. Temptation is so deceptively attractive. It was not to a malicious opponent but to a very close friend that Jesus said, "Get behind me, Satan!"

Redemptorist priest, Dennis McBride writes:

Jesus is tested to see if he is totally committed or not. Is he like Israel in the desert—half-hearted about God's plan? Can you be hungry and still trust God? Can you follow God with your whole heart even when you are aware of the vacancy inside you? The Gospel tells us that Jesus is wholehearted in his commitment and stays loyal to his Father's plan. And when he preaches Jesus sets great store by the undivided heart: "Do not set your hearts on things to eat and to drink...set your heart first on the kingdom of God and these he will give you as well." (Lk 12:29f)

Jesus is also tempted to believe that he can serve God without pain. Do a swan dive from the wing of the temple and land without a scratch! The question is" can Jesus love God with his whole soul even when his own life is in danger? Will Jesus risk his life for the sake of his mission or will he opt for self-preservation? Can you love God even when your life is slipping away?

Jesus' whole life answers yes to this question. He knows that loving God does not mean exemption from harm. He will teach us that we will be saved; he does not tell us that we will be safe. In the end, Jesus' own death on the cross proves that he loves more than life itself-when no angels will come to keep him from harm.

Finally, Jesus is tested about his attitude to power and wealth. To get power will he go to any lengths? Will he love God with his whole might, with everything he is and

has? Or will he grasp for the kind of power and prestige that most people aspire to and most people admire? Will he based his kingdom on twelve shaky apostles or on the firm ground of real estate?

Jesus' whole life says no to that kind of power and authority. And he will teach his own followers to avoid that kind of power: "You know that among pagans the rulers lord it over them, and their great men make their authority felt. This is not to happen among you. No; anyone who wants to be great among you must be your servant" (Mt. 20:24f). And Jesus teaches that with his whole life: he is the Servant of God.

Our testing

Jesus lives his life facing real temptations and that is a measure of his humanity. As we enter Lent we ask ourselves how we face those temptations too. When times get rough and we feel hungry and alone, do we still trust in God? When our life just seems a vast vacancy, do we still believe in the Father who loves us? Are we willing to risk our necks for the sake of the Gospel, or do we settle for guarding our own security? Do we make our authority felt so that people are degraded, or is it a real service to others?

These are not easy questions. They were not easy for Jesus. That is why we need forty days: to let these questions reach us again so that at Easter we can proclaim with an undivided heart that Jesus is the Lord of our lives.

When the Devil Makes a Deal

I do not know the name of the author of the following reflection. He writes:

According to the German legend, Faust was an astrologer who longed for restored youthfulness, fame, and fortune. Now, there is nothing wrong with youth, fame, or fortune, to be sure. But Faust so longed for these that his yearning became obsessive. And such obsessive longings drew the attention of the devil, who is always on the prowl, sniffing for the scent of irrepressible desire. As you recall, the devil offered Faust all that he wished—youth, fame, and fortune—an instant gratification, for the duration of his life. But in exchange, Faust had to give the devil his soul for eternity when he died. To Faust, it seemed like a good deal. A simple contract and handshake, and it was done. Immediately Faust was handsome, popular, and rich, and he enjoyed those benefits throughout his life.

Of course, the good deal did not look nearly so good when it came time for Faust to die. But by then the die had been cast. And Faust entered eternity, and our folklore, as the poster child depicting the tragic consequences that befall those who make deals with the devil. The story proved to be very popular as it passed down in oral tradition from parents to children, and from pastors to parishioners, for centuries. The tale of Faust is retold in the writings of Marlowe and Goethe, was staged in the operas of Berlioz and Gounod, and inspired a symphony by Liszt.

But long before the legend of Faust, the New Testament writers recorded another encounter between the devil and a man. But this story is not a Faustian tragedy, for the man named Jesus wins his battle with the devil. That story forms the reading today from Saint Luke's gospel. As we enter the season of Lent today, the Church turns to this ancient story, and we seek from this test a path we might follow when we are tempted by a devil's deal.

Temptations are not enticements to do evil, but to twist something good for our own convenience.

Notice the subtlety of the devil. He does not come to Jesus until forty days have passed. By this time Jesus is tired, he is lonely. The desert elements have sapped his strength. Like a lioness seeking the weakest and smallest animal from a herd, the devil waits to pounce when he thinks his prey is most vulnerable.

And when the tempter speaks, it is with a whisper, with innuendo, with mere suggestions. What could be wrong with satisfying hunger, turning a few rocks into bread? Would not Jesus create bread in the wilderness for a great multitude later in his ministry? And what's wrong with using political power to overthrow oppressors? Or using miracles to prove God's existence and convince the skeptics? These are the implied shortcuts to a world-wide Church that the devil offers to Jesus in the wilderness. And who would know anyway, way out there in the desert? How subtle and sly are the innuendoes of the devil's counsel! But Jesus anticipated this tactic of Satan. As far back of the Garden of Eden, the whisper of the devil was to rise, not to fall. He did not suggest to Eve and Adam that the forbidden fruit would make them like the devil, but like God. The fall is there, to be sure, when you cut a deal with the devil. It is just hidden in the fine print. Just ask Faust!

When God created the world, he called it good. Evil sneaks into this world when we succumb to a serpentine voice asking us to use something good for a twisted purpose. So, money is not evil, it is the love of money that leads to evil. And alcohol is not evil, but the abuse of it is. We could say the same of beauty, of power, of credit cards, of technology, and of food. The devil tried to get Jesus to use his creative power to satisfy his own needs, and thus subtly shift the focus of Jesus' ministry from the path of suffering redemptive love to one of self-preservation. It

was in essence, a temptation to by-pass the cross in favor of a more comfortable life. And Jesus said, "No."

How are you faring with this same temptation? What are you living for? Is it worth dying for?

Second, temptations are not signs of weakness, but of strength.

On the backside of every strength is its hidden weakness, its Achilles heel. If you are beautiful, the temptation is to use that beauty to open doors of your own ego, or to invest too much of your self-worth in superficial and temporary appearance. If you are wealthy, the temptation is to become possessed by your possessions, rather than use them for God's glory and purposes. If you are powerful or popular, the temptation is to believe that you are essentially different than the rest of humanity, better than others, and therefore worthy of their servitude and adoration. All of these gifts can make a life great when channeled in service to the world, and all of them can be distorted and wasted if used only to selfish ends. Faust missed this truth, and it cost him his soul. Jesus understood this truth, and in the end, though he gave up his life, he did not trade in his soul.

So, how are we to withstand temptation? The path of Jesus marks the way. Just remember your baptism, and remember why you are here in the first place. Your life is God's gift to you, and using it in service to your fellowman is your gift back. A life lived by a lesser value is just simply not a good deal. And if anyone tries to tell you otherwise, just do what Jesus did-tell the snake "no".

PRAYER TO MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL

Saint Michael the Archangel,
Defend me in battle;
Be my protection
Against the snares of the devil
May God rebuke him,
We humbly pray; and do thou,
O Prince of the Heavenly Host,
By the power of God,
Thrust into hell Satan and all evil spirits
Who wander throughout the world
For the ruin of souls. Amen

If we believe God has given each of us a guardian angel to protect and guide us, then it is important that we frequently relate to our heavenly guide and protector.

Have a blessed week,

Le. Saron