



First Sunday of Lent C March 10, 2019

◆ THE TEMPTATIONS OF JESUS AND OUR TEMPTATIONS

◆ PLEASE TELL OTHERS ABOUT MY WRITINGS ON OUR WEBSITE

In the Letter to the Hebrews, we read:

In Jesus, we have a High Priest who was not incapable of feeling our weaknesses; but we have one who has been tempted in every way that we are, though he is without sin. Let us be confident then in approaching the throne of grace, that we shall have mercy from him and find grace when we are in need of help. (4:15-16)

It may be very hard for us to believe that Jesus, the Son of God, was indeed tempted in every way that we are. Yet, that is exactly what the author of Hebrews says.

In today's Gospel, we encounter Jesus out in the desert praying and fasting and being tempted by the devil. Just as his ancestors spent 40 years in the desert, Jesus spends 40 days in the desert. But unlike his ancestors, Jesus does not succumb to the temptations he encounters there. In the desert, Israel said "yes" to temptation, but Jesus says "no."

The Devil is real

Luke tells us that near the end of the fast, when Jesus is hungry, "the devil comes to him." The devil is a "fallen angel" who rebelled against God (Rev. 12:7-9). He uses his power not to lead people to God but away from God. Scripture calls him "the father of lies," "the adversary," "the seducer," "the slanderous one." In her teaching on the devil, the Church tells us that here is one in our midst who desires not our well-being but our destruction (*The Catechism*, paras 392-95, 2850-55).

The Devil tempts us where we are most vulnerable and offers us something that has all the appearances of good.

Notice, the devil comes to Jesus at the end of his long fast. As a normal human being, Jesus must have been very hungry. The thief seeks to enter the house where it is most vulnerable—a cracked window, for example.

For many people today, the cracked window or weak area is sexuality, for others, its materialism. Fred Craddock writes:

Temptation beckons us to do that about which much good can be said.... Real temptation is an offer not to fall but to rise. The tempter in Eden did not ask, "Do you wish to be as the devil?" but, "Do you wish to be as God?" There is nothing here about debauchery; no self-respecting devil would approach a person with offers of personal, domestic or social ruin. This is in the small print at the bottom of temptation.

Craddock further writes:

Temptation is an indication of strength, not of weakness. The greater the strength, the greater the temptation. How fierce must have been Jesus' battle. 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!"

Temptation, to be real, must have a real attraction to it, otherwise, it is not a temptation. The Book of Genesis 3:6 says: "The forbidden fruit was good to eat and pleasing to the eye and was desirable for the knowledge that it could give"—a masterful insight into the psychology of temptation. I am *never* tempted to eat corned beef. But *daily* I am tempted to eat apple pie and ice cream!

So what is so attractive about the three temptations that Satan offers Jesus? Before we look at each temptation, it will be important to remember that the temptations of Jesus are linked to his Messiahship. Scholars tell us that, at his baptism, Jesus became aware not only that he was the Messiah but also what *kind* of Messiah God was calling him to be, namely, a *humble, suffering servant* versus a *military, sensational and super popular* one. In order to be a successful Messiah, Jesus knows that he will need to gain the attention of the crowds. To help Jesus do this, Satan has some tempting suggestions for Jesus. In other words, in the following temptations, Satan tempts Jesus to exercise his Messiahship in ways that would surely give him success and popularity, but which would also be contrary to God's design and plan.

The First Temptation

In the first temptation, the devil suggests that Jesus take care of his hunger needs by “turning stones into bread.” That would be no temptation for us because we do not have the power to turn stones into bread. But he who turned water into wine could turn stones into bread.

We must believe that this is a real temptation for Jesus at the *end* of a 40-day fast. Scholars tell us that the devil was also tempting Jesus to use his miraculous powers to turn stones into bread so that he could feed the hungry masses. That would surely make Jesus a very popular Messiah. Jesus uses Scripture to combat Satan. In response to the first temptation Jesus says: “*Not on bread alone shall people live, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God*” (Matthew 4:4).

It is as if Jesus is saying to Satan: “*I may be very hungry and I may very much want to win over the masses but I am not going to misuse my God-given powers for self-serving purposes. My deeper hunger is to do the will of him who sent me.*” Jesus does not come to feed and satisfy people’s physical hunger primarily but their spiritual hunger. This is the deeper meaning of the miracle of the loaves and fishes. Jesus is saying, “*If I can satisfy your physical hunger, I can also satisfy your soul hunger*” (see John 6).

The Second Temptation

The devil takes Jesus to the top of the mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world and says, “*These you can have if you will adore me.*” We all know the importance of wealth and power to gain political clout. With such power, Jesus could easily drive out the Romans and he would immediately be crowned King by the people. Price tag: idolatry.

Again, using Scripture, Jesus responds: “*You shall do homage to God. Him alone shall you adore.*” For Jesus, the only one he will adore is God. God is his Center, and not even the allurements of riches and power can pull him from his true Center.

The Third Temptation

In the third temptation, the devil has the audacity to use (or rather, misuse) the Scriptures to tempt Jesus. “*Jump down from the temple and the angels will protect you*” (Psalm 91:11-12). Such a gesture before the people would show them that he is indeed the Messiah. Jesus responds: “*Get lost, Satan, you shall not put the Lord your God to the test.*”

Then Luke adds: “*When the devil had finished all his tempting, he left him to await another opportunity.*” It is

like the devil is saying: “*Don’t worry, I’ll be back, Jesus.*” We can be sure he came back many times to try to steer Jesus away from the *Suffering Servant’s path* which Jesus knew that he had to walk. In fact, he tries to use Peter to steer Jesus away from going to Jerusalem to die. Jesus recognizes the devil’s ploy—which is why he tells Peter, “*Get behind me, Satan.*” It is a bit scary to think that Satan seeks to use you and me to cause others to stumble and walk a path not intended by God.

Jesus withstands Satan’s temptations. His weapons are the Holy Spirit and God’s Word. The Holy Spirit helps Jesus to *see* that what appear like good suggestions are, in fact, evil suggestions.

Our Temptations

As with Jesus, God also has a path for us to walk. Our path as Christians is, of course, the path of Jesus. When we were baptized, we (or our parents and godparents) said “no” to the ways of Satan, and “yes” to the ways of Jesus. Our daily call and challenge is to be faithful to our baptismal commitment. This is not always easy because we are all broken and weak in ways and all of us are tempted in many ways to leave the straight and narrow path. Our temptations are from “the world,” “the flesh,” and “the devil.”

The *world* especially tempts us to live a totally materialistic and hedonistic life and to look out for Number One at all costs. The world of advertising tells us daily to place our trust not in God, but in things and in one’s own power. The *flesh* is that part of us that is broken, wounded, fragile, and drawn to sinful ways: unforgiveness, revenge, lies, unethical and addictive behaviors, lust, infidelity, manipulation of others, and disrespectful treatment of others. The *devil’s* full-time job is to steer us away from God and his ways.

To help readers deal with the devil, St. Paul urges them to “*grow strong in the Lord, with the strength of his power. Put God’s armor on so as to be able to resist the devil’s tactics*” (Ephesians 6:10-11).

More on how Satan works

The following reflection is by Fr. Basil Cole, O.P.

At the onset of the Lenten Sundays, the Church places before us the extraordinary battle of Jesus with the devil after he had spent 40 days in the desert fasting. This is a timely reminder that the greatest temptation of the devil for the vast majority of believers is to lead the people of God either to conclude his nonexistence or to simply forget that he exists. Once the devil persuades anyone that he does not exist, it is very much easier for

him to lead that person astray, though slowly over a period of years.

It is much like having an “operative” or “mole” hidden in a government, one who is able to manipulate policy because his spying goes undetected. It is much easier to deny the existence of the devil than of God because there are so many more signs of God’s existence than there are of the devils. Only revelation teaches us that there is such a creature as Satan, the tempter.

How does he do it? St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that the devil can neither take away free will, nor know what is going on in our minds, nor directly intervene in our spiritual life. But he can persuasively influence the imagination and emotions so as to lead the mind and heart astray. The devil tries by friendly persuasion to get us to believe that God is our real enemy, in the sense that God gives us impossible laws and difficult vocations to fulfill. This is especially persuasive when the temptations to commit sexual sins seem overwhelming. It is easy to begin thinking that God has made too many impossible and arbitrary demands upon human nature.

Another temptation of the devil is to get us to believe—as a result of sickness, tragedy and other setbacks—that God no longer loves or cares because He has forgotten us. This temptation is fueled by another illusion of the devil, whereby we think that feeling the sweetness of God is equivalent to loving God or a sure sign that He loves us.

Further, everything going our way in terms of riches, fame, power over others and the like is a sure sign to the deluded of the love of God. So when reverses come our way, it is easy to believe that God has abandoned us, and nourishing those thoughts (false meditations and contemplations, really) leads to abandoning God. People then no longer go to Mass or confession or spend time in authentic prayer, meditation and contemplation.

Yet another temptation of the devil consists in persuading people to form their consciences by inventing their own principles of morality, instead of depending upon God’s revelation. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains concerning the temptation of Adam and Eve:

In that sin man preferred himself to God and by that very act scorned Him. He chose himself over and against God, against the requirements of his creaturely status and therefore against his own good. Created in a state of holiness, man was destined to be fully “divinized” by God in glory. Seduced by the devil, he wanted to “be like God,” but “without God, before God, and not in accordance with God” (no 398).

(Unfortunately I mislaid the rest of the above article.)

Please tell others (near and far) about my writings on the website.

Fairly recently, I received an email from a woman in Australia thanking me for my article on *Grief — Mourning the Loss of a Loved One*. More recently, I received an email from a prison chaplain in England stating she has found some of my writings very helpful in her prison ministry.

For those of you unaware of my various writings, the following is a list.

Commentaries and Faith Sharing Questions. These are used by many small groups within the parish, by some neighboring parishes, and by small groups in other parts of the country.

Catechism Topics. This is a four-page set of 28 articles which summarize the teachings of our Church and are presented in our Universal Catechism and by the United States Catholic Catechism for Adults. Suggestions on how to use these articles with small groups are also on the website.

Three Levels of Commentaries on the 46 books of the Old Testament. See the website for more on the three levels. You should be able to find help (in Level 3) with any difficult verse, passage or story in the Old Testament (and there are a bunch of them).

Church History. This is a series of 20 articles that seek to cover in summary form the 2,000 years of our Church’s history.

A Commentary on the Mass. Dynamic Catholic is now looking at publishing this as a small book.

Treasury of Prayers. This booklet contains beautiful prayers for every day of the month.

Miscellaneous articles. Some of the articles here include Dealing with Grief, Anger, Guilt, Fear, and Difficult Decision.

Many people are surprised to find these are very easy to read articles on a wide variety of topics. When people find them and ask to use them in their parish, I gladly grant permission. I only ask that they tell others about the writings. Now I am inviting you to do the same.

A BIG thank you to ***Maria Sittig*** (who does the bulletin and other things) for typing all of the above articles. Without Maria, these writings would never have seen the light of day.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Sean