

As we begin Lent you probably noticed some differences in the church and the Mass. The church is rather bare, there are no flowers. We did not sing the Gloria and we did not sing Alleluia before the Gospel. If you are wondering why, it is because these are all expressions of joy for the Resurrection. Lent is a penitential season in which we prepare for the joyful occasion of the Resurrection. Having a more solemn atmosphere, leaving the Gloria and Alleluia out of our liturgy helps us recognize the nature of this season. It is the liturgical way of "*withdrawing into the desert*" to pray as we prepare for Christ's Passion and Resurrection.

On this first Sunday of Lent, as with every year, the Church presents us with the story of the temptation of Christ which also occurs in the desert. This year we hear Mark's version which is the shortest and omits the details of the temptations. We need to look to Matthew or Luke for those details.

Why do we focus on the story of the temptation of Christ at the beginning of Lent? It is the Church's way of leading us into our desert to confront the temptations that we must deal with each day. These temptations come from Satan. His purpose is to move us off our path to God, to make something other than God the focus of our lives and to distract us from our relationship with him. We are led into the desert to confront the devil, to confront our own temptations, and to overcome them.

This penitential season is all about recognizing those temptations, addressing them and turning away from our sinful responses. Jesus teaches us how to respond to those temptations through his actions in the desert. And if we look closely we can see in his temptations our own personal struggles.

We'll use Matthew's account to take a closer look at each temptation.

After Jesus spends 40 days fasting in the desert he is hungry. Hunger is one of our most basic physical needs. The first temptation from the devil is for Jesus to use his power to change stones into bread for him to eat. This temptation is an appeal to satisfy his very real physical need, his hunger.

It is the same for us. We are tempted daily to make the satisfaction of sensual desires, food, drink, sex, pleasure and comfort the center of our life. Not that these things are bad in themselves, they are not. But when they become the focus of our life, when they become dominant over our desire to know and to love God, then they become a temptation to sin. These temptations are strongest when we have been

deprived of a physical need, as Jesus was after fasting for 40 days. It is easy for us to become obsessed with satisfying an acute need, and to forget our primary purpose.

What does Jesus' response teach us? He does not forget his purpose. He says: *“One does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.”*

Simply put, we must not base our life on just satisfying our physical needs. Our life's purpose needs to be much deeper than that. Our physical needs and desires, though important, need to be put into proper perspective with our life in God, which should be the true driving force in our daily activities. Satisfying our physical needs should not dominate our lives, they must be subordinate to our quest to know, love and serve God.

In the second temptation, Satan took Jesus to the top of the temple in Jerusalem, the most prominent place in all of Israel. There everyone would see him. The devil tempts Jesus to throw himself down and let the angels save him, proving to everyone that he was indeed the Messiah, the most important person in all the world. This is the temptation to embrace honor, praise and glory, to be noticed and admired. Again, these are not bad in themselves. It is when we elevate them to become the purpose of our life, only to inflate our ego or to build up our reputation, that they become a temptation to sin. When we give into this temptation we become prideful and turn away from living the life to which Jesus calls us, one of humility and charity. Fame, when not balanced with humility, is a dangerous thing.

Jesus' response:

*“You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.”*

How does the response help us? I think it helps us recognize that when we find ourselves engaging in behaviors that merely feed our egos we are being manipulated by the devil. He is trying to maneuver us into becoming prideful, forsaking the virtues of humility and charity. Jesus' response helps us recognize the source of the temptation, to recognize it for what it is, and to resist it.

Finally Satan took Jesus to the top of a mountain and offered him all the kingdoms of the world. It is interesting to note that Satan is offering Jesus exactly that for which he had come to earth, to be the Lord of all nations, but at the cost of worshiping Satan. He is attempting to twist Jesus' mission to be focused on power and

possession, not on our salvation. This third temptation, the lust for power and possessions, for us, is possibly the most alluring of temptations. We are tempted to make the acquisition of possessions the purpose of our lives, to view personal power, the domination and manipulation of others, as our ultimate goal. We are tempted to seek power for ourselves instead of deferring to the power of God. We don't have to look very far to see examples of people who would forsake anything and everything to gain and keep power. Nor do we have to look very far to find people who seek happiness in owning “stuff”. These things may generate a short term thrill but they won't bring long term happiness.

Jesus' response:

*“The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve.”*

Eternal happiness cannot be obtained by worshiping material things, or making ourselves the god of our life. It is the worship of the one God that leads to true happiness in this world and eternal happiness in the next.

It was the Holy Spirit that drove Jesus into the desert to confront these temptations, to clarify who he was and to prepare himself for his ministry. It is recounted to us to prepare us to receive him as the person who transcends these temptations and to be a model for us.

The Church invites us into the desert of Lent to confront these same temptations. The satisfaction of sensual desires over seeking God, the building up of ego over love and humility, the striving to make ourselves or our possessions our purpose in life.

During this time the Church urges us to take up the Lenten disciplines of fasting, prayer and almsgiving. It's not surprising that there is a parallel contrast between these three disciplines and the three temptations. Fasting helps us confront the temptations of sensual satisfaction, prayer helps us confront our ego and fosters humility and charity, almsgiving forces us to let go of our love of possessions and to serve others.

We also have a tradition of abstinence, that is, “giving up” something during Lent. Our giving something up, along with our fasting, is a way of creating our own personal desert experience. It, too, is an aid to overcoming the temptations we encounter. You might wonder why giving up something like chocolate would help with overcoming your desire for it. Does not giving it up tend to heighten your desire for it? If we are sincere

about transcending the temptations we face, then creating a situation in which we have to face the temptation can help us come to terms with it. The heightened desire helps us focus on our spiritual journey.

So for this Lent, I suggest that you take this first week to examine your heart to see which of these temptations Satan is finding most effective in leading you away from your journey to God. Then choose something to give up that will help you focus on that particular weakness. Then let the struggle that will ensue mold you into a better person, the person that God wants you to be.

When Jesus responded to Satan in each of the temptations, he quoted Scripture. I offer to you another quotation to keep in mind as we venture into the desert this Lent. It is from Deuteronomy 6:4-5, the prayer called the Shema.

*“Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone! Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.”*

May this Lent be a blessing to your relationship with God.