

First Sunday Of Lent
Sunday 21 February 2010

If you have ever been in a desert, then you probably know that although the desert can be a beautiful place, it can also be foreboding as well. The isolation and the harshness of the environment that one experiences in the desert, can easily make a person feel vulnerable. Therefore, the desert, metaphorically, is a place where we are stripped bare and forced to confront our deepest fears and weaknesses. And you have to realize, this is something that most people understandably, don't want to do. This is a place that people don't want to go, because we are afraid to go there, and yet at some point in time, we need to go there. We need that desert experience in order to confront and take on the very things that hold us back, because it is at our weakest point that the devil attacks us the hardest. This is the place where we are most susceptible to temptation.

And so in today's gospel, we hear about how Jesus takes on and faces his temptations in the desert, and how he deals with it. And the temptations he was presented with, really are in many ways very similar to the ones that we face every day, believe it or not. Now, you might be thinking to yourself, "What in the world are you talking about, I've never been tempted to turn stones into bread." Fair enough. However, the real temptation here for Jesus was not that turning stones into bread is wrong, the real temptation for Jesus was to rely on himself and his powers alone, to use his powers to satisfy himself, to serve himself, rather than relying on God the Father. That is why Jesus responds with the statement that "one does not live on bread alone."

And that's where we come in because you see, many times we are tempted to rely on ourselves rather than on God. We want to take things into our own hands, we want to be in control. We are tempted to live only for ourselves and satisfy all our whims and desires. Whenever we fail to pray, or to not bother attending Mass, whenever we hurt another person through our words and actions, or whenever we prop ourselves up in a dishonest way, that is really us saying, "I want to take matters into my own hands, rather than place my trust in you God."

The second temptation that Jesus experienced is the one where Satan offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world as long as Jesus agreed to worship him. The temptation was a temptation of wealth and power, and that can be very alluring for all of us. Jesus was basically offered a short-cut to world dominion, and that had to have been far more attractive than the alternative of some day being humiliated, tortured and crucified on the cross. It would be quite understandable if Jesus asked himself, "Why not gain riches and power for myself? Why not make people bow down to me? Why not set the world right by making everyone follow my plan? I am after all the Son of God right?" Well one of the reasons is because Jesus knows that God the Father had a plan for him that didn't include these things, and he also knew that God does not want slaves. God wants people to be obedient to Him out of love, not fear, and of course love is a choice. It can't be forced out of anyone.

In addition, Jesus also knew that there was a price to pay in gaining the kind of wealth and power that the devil was offering him. Jesus would have basically had to sell his soul to him for it. Therefore, the wealth and power offered Jesus wasn't really true, it was an illusion. And isn't that what we find ourselves faced with as well? Sometimes, we are tempted to take the easy road despite the ethical problems it may present. Sometimes we

place the highest priority on chasing after different things thinking that it will bring us comfort, pleasure, security and control, not realizing that everything we think this world has to offer us is really an illusion compared to what God has to offer. What we sometimes forget is that in truth, we are all at the service of someone or something, no matter who we are. If we are not serving God, then we are serving something else that is less than God. We can't let other desires take priority over doing God's will. Nor can we resort to any means possible to accomplish a goal no matter how noble the goal may be.

Finally, the third temptation. This is the one where satan tells Jesus to jump off the parapet of the temple and let the angels brake his fall. For Jesus, the temptation here was two fold. First of all, the temptation was to use his power to astound people, to entertain them, to get people to like him. And secondly, the temptation involved here was a temptation for Jesus to prove himself. If you will notice, the devil tempted Jesus by saying, "If you are the Son of God..." then do this. Prove it. Jesus would also be tempted in this manner again when he was on the cross, when the people said to him, if you are the Messiah, then come down from that cross so that we may believe in you. And I imagine that this would have been a very strong temptation for Jesus to endure, to make people know who he was.

We are also tempted in this way. We want to prove our worth to others. We want others to think well of us. Sometimes there are a lot of things that we would be willing to do in order gain the acceptance of others. And sometimes there are a lot of things that we would be willing to do in order to assert ourselves over others. Sometimes this is a symptom of a struggle between security versus insecurity, but it also can be a symptom of pride versus humility. But whatever the case, Jesus didn't fall for this temptation either. And so because Jesus was victorious over the devil, we have the hope that we too can be victorious over the devil as long as we allow God to live and work through us. We too can be victorious if we participate in the life of Jesus Christ.

Our forty days in the desert this Lenten season is not meant simply as a test. It is meant to be a time of purification and conversion which will strengthen us along our spiritual journey in life. That in turn will enable us to share in a greater way, the life of Christ, including his cross. And when we are able to share in the cross of Jesus Christ, when we are able to share in his suffering and death, then we can also share in his resurrection as well because it is through Christ's suffering and death that sin and death are destroyed. Therefore, we have to be willing to go into that desert, to confront our deepest fears and weaknesses, and we have to be willing to go to Jesus for help. When we do that, then we are able to share in his victory, the very victory that brings us life and happiness.

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