

First Sunday of Lent: A Man Like Us In All Things but Sin.

As you are well aware, Lent began last Wednesday, Ash Wednesday. This Sunday's gospel is an account of the temptation of the Lord. The account of his temptation is always presented on the First Sunday of Lent because it notes that the Lord fasted for 40 days.

Many times people will say to me, usually in confession, that they have had the temptation to doubt God, or that they have had to fight off temptations of the sexual nature, or temptations to hurt another person physically, or by the type of gossip that would destroy the person's life. For example, someone might be tempted to tell a superior at work or at school that someone who is applying for a position that he or she wants is fighting alcoholism or some other chemical dependency.

The existence of temptations is not sinful. What is sinful is giving in to the temptations. The Fourth Eucharistic Prayer says that Jesus was a man like us in all things but sin. That means that Jesus had to fight off temptations, just as we do. Think about that. Jesus was tempted in the ways we are tempted every day of our lives.

Temptations are part of the human condition. In fact, if you no longer experience any temptations in your life, you should take your pulse because you are probably dead.

Having temptation and giving in to temptation are two different things.

The three temptations the Lord withstood are really temptation that confront us all: the temptation to be self centered, the temptation to ignore God, and the temptation to sacrifice our Christianity to power and authority. Let's look at them.

"Take these stones and turn them into bread," is echoed by us when we make the goal of our lives keeping our stomachs full, or, basically, being selfish. "Man does not live on bread alone," Jesus counters. Our lives are certainly empty when we are self centered. We need God. We need his Word to give us purpose. What will remain of us 500 years from now? Here on earth we will all be gone and probably forgotten. But there is part

of us that can remain here on earth. There is part of us that will last. That part of us is the Presence of the Lord that you and I have strived to make real in the world. There is nothing self-centered in living for the Lord.

"Leap from the top of the Temple and force God to save you," the devil tempts Jesus. It is the temptation that somehow we have a power over God, just as the devil tempted Adam and Eve to disobey God and become equal to Him. I don't think any of us believes that we can be more powerful than God, or that we can force God into action on our behalf. But I do think that we are tempted to follow the relativism of the world and see ourselves as the center of the universe. When we say that our choices in life depend on our own desires, not on what is objectively right or wrong, or, more, when we say that we determine morality ourselves, we act as though we are little gods. Pope Benedict, wrote about the scourge of relativism, as modern man sacrifices principals to his own selfish desires. Who are we to tell God what is right and wrong? Who are we to tell God that He needs to accept our choices even if they are against objective morality? We do not have the right to tempt our God.

The final temptation brought before Jesus was the temptation to sacrifice our faith for the sake of power. This might not seem to apply to us, until we consider the question of the Lord to his disciples, "What profit is it for a man to gain the whole world but sacrifice his very self?" People in the business world are tempted to make compromises in their Christianity to advance their careers. Even in the home, people will push Christian charity aside in order to assert their position in the marriage and family. I used to say the Pilgrims Prayer, "Lord Jesus, have mercy on me a sinner." I have refined it into, "Lord Jesus, have mercy on me an arrogant sinner."

We spend the 40 days of Lent doing battle against these and all the temptation we have to push God outside of our lives.

The weapons we use in our war for the Lord are the three main practices of Lent, prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

During Lent we strengthen our prayer life, our communication with God. Perhaps this means formulating a new prayer schedule. Maybe we need to add evening prayers to our routine and say them before dinner. Or perhaps we can add night prayers immediately before we go to bed. Or

maybe the morning needs to begin with prayer, even if that prayer takes place while we are washing up for the day. Perhaps we can turn off the music or news and just talk to God while we get ready. Here are three very easy meditations that we can say in the shower, or while we are shaving or doing our hair. The first is: God loves me for who I am. And who am I? I am his daughter, his son. We can talk about that with God every morning. The second step to prayer is "God forgives me. He loves me too much to allow me to be destroyed by my past. He has forgiven me. Now I need to forgive myself." So in this second step towards prayer we thank God for his mercy and compassion, and ask Him to help us to forgive ourselves for our past. The third step towards prayer is: God is with me. We can talk to God about the day ahead of us and rest assured that we will not face the day alone. We can remind ourselves that we can do all things in Him who strengthens us. The Gospel reading says that when we pray to God in secret, he will see and hear our secret prayers.

We fast during Lent. This is much deeper than just giving up something or other. This is about taking control of ourselves, disciplining ourselves. This is not about giving up candy, but continuing to feed an unhealthy practice that has become routine, such as drinking to excess, watching porn, etc. Giving up something for Lent is meaningless if we do this while we are planning to attend a party where we know we will get wasted. It is silly to stop eating ice cream while we are looking at porn. If we want to be an Easter people, we have got to get a control of ourselves.

Our Lenten practices should not be limited to prayer and fasting. If that is all we do, then we can easily turn into ourselves. This is why the third Lenten practice is so important: almsgiving. Almsgiving takes its name from the act of giving money to the poor, but it is much more than that. Almsgiving is getting out of ourselves and reaching to those in need. This might mean something as simple as helping an elderly neighbor with her yard work, or bringing in her garbage cans, or it might mean spending time helping another student grasp a concept at school.

Jesus' name means, "Our God Saves." Jesus went into the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights to effect a change in the world. He did battle with the devil and the world to save us. We spend the 40 days of Lent to join Him in saving others, for the One whose life dwells within each of us has intimately involved us in the transformation of the world into the

Kingdom of God.