

## First Sunday of Lent: Integrity

He was alone in the desert. No one would see him. No one would witness his giving in to the devil. He had plenty of excuses available. He was hungry. He had been fasting for forty days. Why shouldn't he do something drastic to get something to eat? The first temptation.

He felt within him the call to lead his people from oppression. With one seemingly meaningless action he could become powerful. Wouldn't any price be worth it if he could lead the people against Rome and establish Israel as the greatest empire in the world? He knew that he was special, chosen. Is not this what He was chosen to do? What would be so wrong with His grasping at power when it was offered to him? The second temptation.

Then there was that third temptation. He believed in scripture. Isn't it reasonable that he should demand a sign from Father? The Father certainly was demanding a great deal from him.

There were plenty of excuses Jesus could have made if he had given in to the devil's temptations. But there was something that would be demanded of him. He would have to sacrifice his integrity. He would have to sacrifice that spiritual part of him that said, "Trust in God," for the sake of the physical part of him that said, "Seize the moment."

In the wilderness, where no one could observe, Jesus chose not self but service of God. He quoted *Deuteronomy 8:30 and 6:13* to the devil's first two temptations, using the Torah to assert that human life is defined by more than physical subsistence, not by bread alone, and that service is owed only to the ultimate source of life, the creator God.

The third testing from the parapet of the Temple was the most severe, for in it the very support for Jesus' opposition to the devil was subverted. The devil quoted scripture. Jesus should test his son-ship against the promise of God to protect him. Jesus rebuked the devil with *Deuteronomy 6:16*, "You shall not test the Lord your God.". He will not force the Father's hand. He will be the servant of *Isaiah 50:10* who walks in darkness yet trusts in the name of the Lord. Later on, Jesus will leap from another high place. At the end of the Gospel Jesus will leap from the cross into his Father's hands as he cried out in the words of *Psalms 30*: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

The devil left Jesus--for a time, he would return when once more the Lord was again severely weakened, this time during the emotional turmoil of the Agony in the Garden. The devil would return, but He would find the Lord strong in faith. Jesus's integrity was intact.

I am drawn to the theme of integrity this Lent. There are people in the public sphere, on both sides of the political aisle, who have no integrity. They appear to be incapable of telling the truth. Perhaps they have embraced relativism to such an extent that they have declared themselves the arbiters of the truth. Many of them adhere to the

guideline of Lenin, "Tell a lie over and over again and people will believe the lie." The liar has no integrity.

Integrity comes from the union of the physical and the spiritual. On Ash Wednesday, the reception of ashes emphasized that a human being is both physical and spiritual. A human being is the only physical creature with the ability to love as God loves. A human being is the only physical creature with the capacity to encounter the love of God.

But a human being is also the only creature capable of compromising his or her existence, his or her integrity. The sacrifice of integrity leads to chaos. When we sin, when I sin, when you sin, we plunge into turmoil. We might make believe that there is nothing wrong with us. We certainly are expert at rationalizing our actions, but we are torn up within ourselves. When we sin we are in turmoil. We cannot stand our own hypocrisy.

When we fight off this temptation, we are in peace.

Every priest has had the humbling experience of walking with people from turmoil to peace. This experience usually takes place in the sacrament of penance. The priest is not just an intermediary with God forgiving sins, but a witness to a person becoming whole. It is a humbling experience because the priest is acutely aware of his own sinfulness, the times that he has chosen the physical over the spiritual, chaos over integrity. At the same time it is a beautiful experience for a priest to walk with a penitent towards peace. The priest is privileged to be part of a person becoming fully human, integrating the physical and spiritual dimensions of his or her life, trusting in God to be whole. This is what St. Irenaeus meant when he said that the :Glory of God is man fully alive."

This Sunday's Gospel reading demands that I take the blinders off my heart and see where I am in turmoil. The reading demands that I listen to the Word of God within me calling me to be the person the Lord has given me the capacity to be. The reading offers me peace over turmoil.

Where are we in turmoil? Where do we lack integrity? Is it in our relationship with family and friends? Are hatred and grudges destroying us? Is our lifestyle wholesome? Are we rationalizing our way through immorality? Do we lie to ourselves so much that we believe our own lies?

The ancients saw the three temptations of the Lord as describing three main categories of sin: love of pleasure, love of possessions and love of power. When pleasure, possessions or power become the goals of our lives, we sacrifice our integrity to materialism. We sacrifice our wholesomeness to turmoil. We enter into chaos. Sin is chaos. And the devil is the master of chaos.

Human integrity, the wholeness of body and soul, physical and spiritual, is the focus of the first part of Lent. You and I begin Lent by looking within ourselves. We ask

ourselves: “Am I in peace, or am I in turmoil?” If we are honest enough with ourselves, then perhaps we have to admit that over the last year certain things have crept into our lives without our noticing them. They might seem small, even not worth noting, but they can wreck havoc within our being, and bring chaos where there should be peace. Unless we are careful, our integrity can be compromised.

When we feel disjointed, torn up inside, just not happy with ourselves, when we are hurting on the inside, then we need to remember that the Lord does not want us in pain. He wants us to be whole, wholesome, and at peace. He gives us his power and strength to integrate our body and soul. “Be with me, Lord, when I am in trouble, be with me Lord my God,” we sang in the Responsorial Psalm, from Psalm 91. He is with us. He is on our lips and in our hearts St. Paul tells the Romans, and us. With him we can conquer any enemy. With him we can scale any wall. With him we can fight off temptation. With him we can preserve, or if needed, restore our integrity.

The main focus of Lent should not be on what we give up, what prayers we say, even what charity we practice. If we want to make a good Lent, more than that, if we want to be better Christians, our focus should be on our integrity, the harmonious union of our physical and spiritual lives.

Jesus Christ offers us dignity. Jesus Christ offers us peace. Jesus Christ offers us integrity.