

LENT 1

Luke 4:1-13 (Our Temptations)

Every year the season of Lent starts with the story of how Jesus' temptation by the devil in the desert wilderness. This story takes place in two significant locations: the wilderness and Jerusalem. Historically, the wilderness was the place where God met the Jewish people at Sinai after rescuing them from Egypt. In the wilderness God shaped them into God's covenant people; cared for and led by God with cloud and fire. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is also led, but this time by the Holy Spirit, into the wilderness, where he faces temptation by his adversary, the devil.

Jerusalem, the city of David, is the centre of Jewish power, identity, and worship. At the time of Jesus, the second temple had been renovated and expanded by Herod the Great and was the centre of worship for the Jewish people. The place of power and worship is the setting for the final temptation.

Most of the story takes place in the dialogue between Jesus and the devil. Jesus was hungry after fasting for forty days. During these days of fasting he was being tempted by the devil. Today's story describes the final three temptations facing Jesus at the end of those forty days.

We often are dismayed by temptation, alarmed by the fact that when we pause and look into our hearts, we notice that deep down inside them are desires that we know are wrong, wants that we know if indulged will lead to something evil or harmful.

We are alarmed because we consider ourselves to be good people; honest, hardworking, and upright. Yet, there, lurking inside some of us is; anger, jealousy, envy, or bitterness. Inside others we find cravings of every sort; from the desire to own ever more material things, to the desire to possess other people, to control people; the desire to use one's body for one's own pleasures, one's time to meet one's own selfish needs, and one's talents to earn praise and profit for one's own self.

Temptation and ugly desire are distressing. For some people, the more vivid the sense of temptation, the more disturbed they become. They begin to question their spirituality, their faithfulness, their ability to do good. They begin to feel inferior, weak, uncertain, and insecure.

At the heart of this emotional distress lies the belief that if we are really doing what we should be doing, then we would not experience the temptations that we do experience, that our impulses would all be for the good, that our faith would keep us from even considering doing something we ought not to do.

In response to this feeling, today's gospel says – NO! That is not how it works. Temptation is part of the human condition. It is so much a part of our humanity, that when we are most connected to God, is when we are most tempted.

Look at Jesus! He is raised in righteousness. He studies, he works, he observes the Sabbath,

and sits with the teachers of the law. And finally, when the time is right, he is baptised by John in the Jordan and the voice of God approves him and the spirit of God settles upon him. And then – WHAM! He is sent into the wilderness where he is tempted; not once, not twice, but three times. And when the devil finally leaves Jesus, he does so only to wait for another time, for another opportunity.

The good news of today's gospel lies in the fact that Jesus himself was tempted, and that we are not spiritually or morally inferior because deep down within us, lie desires that are unworthy. We are not evil or less faithful simply because we consider cutting a corner or two here or there. Actually, the opposite might be true. We might actually be experiencing temptation because we are worthy of being tempted.

If we are already on our way toward a specific destination as fast as our feet can take us, and that destination happens to be the one that the devil wants us to arrive at; he is not going to stick out his foot to try to trip us. And he's not going to suggest that we turn around and go the other way.

We are not spiritually or morally inferior simply because we experience temptation. Nor are we sinners because we feel sinful desires. Sin only comes into play when we succumb to temptation, when we indulge the impulses that we should not indulge.

Temptation can be broken into three categories. First, there are physical temptations, the urges we have to satisfy our physical wants regardless of how we go about doing it. Then there are emotional temptations; temptations to indulge one's feelings, one's ego, to make oneself the centre of all things, to receive all glory, all praise, power, and attention.

And then there are spiritual temptations; the temptation to test God, to dare God to prove his love, to manipulate God, to get God to use his magical powers on our behalf so that we may impress others with them, that we may show others our favoured status in the eyes of God.

It's true, we are tempted in all three ways, but temptation is always a spiritual matter because temptation very rarely comes to us as a clear cut decision between good and evil. Temptation comes to us shrouded in goodness, in plausibility, in attractiveness. It comes as an outgrowth of the circumstances that we are in; circumstances that have their own logic and their own appeal.

Should we put on our sweats and walk or run this morning? No. It's raining and we don't want to get wet or sick. Should we talk about the issue that we have been avoiding with our spouse? No. The kids will be home soon and we'll be interrupted. No. She is not in a good mood. No. It won't do any good anyway. Should I go to the doctor about the pain in my chest? No. It's probably just indigestion. No. If it's serious then it won't make any difference anyway. No. Other people are sicker than I am and I don't want to abuse the medical system like others do.

We face situation after situation everyday; some of them relatively trivial, and some of major

consequence in which the choice is not between good and evil, but between good and better, between better and best, between what is hard and what is easy.

To be tempted is to accept what comes naturally; food when hungry, water when thirsty, sex when lonely, power when in authority, condescension when working with inferiors, impatience when dealing with the slow, the old, or the feeble, hatefulness when dealing with those who contradict us, smugness when considering one's own performance, pride when thinking of one's own humility.

All these things are natural. All these things are easy. And these things are common. They are the fruit of temptations that are hard to refuse. You're hungry Jesus. If you are the Son of God, do what comes naturally to you. Turn these rocks into bread. Use your position to your advantage. It won't hurt anyone. You want to change the world, to make a difference, to see justice done, to help the poor, to set your people free. All you have to do is simply bow down right now and worship me.

Jesus, you know God loves you. Your plan will sell a lot easier if people see that you are special to God. Let God save you from certain disaster. Let his angels carry you up from the ground in the presence of the priests and teachers and everyone in Jerusalem. Then you won't have to go around from home to home, preaching and healing people. You won't have to work to convince people to follow your way. They'll line up for miles and miles just for a chance to see you .

Temptation is a natural thing. It appeals to our natural impulses, both for good and for bad. Temptation is also an easy thing. And that is a major part of its' attraction. And there is only one cure for it. The cure is focus or faith. Christ showed us the way by rebuffing the things that tempted him, by focussing on what God revealed to Israel through Moses and the prophets. When tempted with the easy way out, he drew from his heart to his mind, the word of God that he had been taught: one does not live by bread alone; worship the Lord your God and serve only him. Do not put the Lord your God to the test.

Christ resisted the easy way, the natural way, by recalling God's way, by speaking it out in the midst of his vision, his dream, his temptation. And so can we, and even more so because Christ is in us. He who won the victory over the evil one; he who resisted successfully; dwells within us. He knows how hard it is to walk the walk and talk the talk. He knows how easy it is to close our eyes to the troubles around us; close our ears to the cries of need and despair; close our hearts to the hearts of those who are with us or near us.

He knows the attraction of the quick fix and the struggle to keep on the more difficult road. And he stands ready to help when we call upon him. When we touch the Christ who is in us, we reach inside ourselves and ask ourselves: What would Jesus do here and now; then we are on the road we should be on.

At the end of our days God will not ask us if we did wrong. Nor will God ask us if we have been tempted. But he will ask us if we have learned to play the tunes of love on the spiritual

harmonica he has given us. He will ask if we have walked the road that Christ was on in the direction that Christ walked it.

And if we have, and in doing so we happened to stumble and fall once in a while, God will bandage the wounds and wipe the tears from our eyes, and give us a hug, for we will have done all that he expects of us. Amen.