

March 10, 2019

First Sunday of Lent

Call upon the name of the Lord!

Deuteronomy 26:4-10

Psalms 91 :1-2, 10-15

Romans 10:8-13

Luke 4:1-13

In the first reading Moses reminds the people that the Lord heard their cry, saw their toil, afflictions, and hardships. They were brought out of bondage by God's terrifying power and they witnessed his many signs and wonders. In thankfulness they are to bring offerings to the altar of the Lord and with the community celebrate the good things given them.

The psalmist emphasizes that the faithful who completely trust in the Lord will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. The just are always working in the presence of danger and the angels will guard them so they do not stumble and fall. Those who continually call upon the Lord will be delivered and their prayers will be answered.

In the second reading, the question, "Are you saved?", often asked by some Christians is addressed. Being saved involves "confessing with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believing in your heart that God raised him from the dead." Confession leads to salvation and faith from the heart to justification; no one who believes in Jesus' saving power will be disgraced.

In the Gospel Jesus is led into the desert by the Holy Spirit where he fasts for forty days and is tempted by the devil. Each temptation is appropriately countered with Scripture and each is typical of what Jesus and his followers will experience throughout their ministry.



Temptation

The way in which Jesus was to meet his responsibility and show what kind of person he is can be exemplified by his testing in temptations. After 40 days of fasting and prayer Moses returned to the people with God's ideal for a new nation (Deut 9:8-11) and Jesus perfects this ideal during his ministry.

It is said some of the stones in the wilderness looked like loaves of bread and the temptation to turn one into the other would have immediately relieved Jesus' hunger. Perhaps this suffering in hunger made him more aware of the struggles that many people had for the bare necessities of life. Jesus responds with Deuteronomy 8:3.

When the devil sought to be worshipped by Jesus one could have thought of an interim compromise with evil in the hope of gaining a greater advantage for good at a later time. Jesus refused to compromise his ideals and break a commandment. Jesus responds with Deuteronomy 6:13.

When tempted to throw himself from the temple the devil may have thought that if Jesus is not saved from the fall that is the end of him, but if he is miraculously saved it would demand God's immediate support and this would be tantamount to testing God. Jesus responds with Deuteronomy 6:16.

Jesus' temptations modeled an aspect of all temptations, namely, receiving some kind of immediate and personal pleasure instead of working for a greater good that can eventually be shared for the benefit of others.

If Jesus had to combat temptations then it is clear that no one is so holy and good that he will not be tempted. The disciples realized this when Paul said, "It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." (Acts 14:21)

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(1.13) Temptations

Everyone is put to the test by being attracted and seduced by that person's own wrong desire,¹ and as long as we live in this world we will experience temptations.

We must be quick to recognize temptations while *keeping sober and alert, because our enemy the devil is on the prowl like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.² There are no persons so perfect and holy to be without temptations and even our Lord was led into the desert for forty days being put to the test by the devil,³ and if you aspire to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for an ordeal.⁴*

Even so we may profit from temptations even though they can be troublesome and even difficult because they humble, cleanse, and instruct us in ways we might never have known. Paul told his listeners, *we must all experience many hardships before we enter the kingdom of God.⁵ Jesus also told the disciples, You are the men who have stood by me faithfully in my trials.⁶ And then there are those that could not bear temptations, lost hope of salvation, and eventually drifted away.*

There is no community, no church, no place so removed that it does not encounter temptations and hardships.

When one temptation leaves us another eventually comes bringing with it suffering and this occurs because we have lost our original state of innocence. To escape them without confrontation can only make matters worse as they need to be overcome with patience, prayer, and humility that make us stronger than the adversary who brings them. If one considers only the outward aspect of temptations without seeking and removing the root causes they will become more intense when they return. *"When an unclean spirit goes out of a person it roams through arid regions searching for rest but finds none. Then it says, 'I will return to my home from which I came.' But upon returning, it finds it empty, swept clean, and put in order. Then it goes and brings back with itself seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they move in and dwell there; and the last condition of that person is worse than the first.⁷*

With prayerful patience we will be *fortified, in accordance with his glorious strength, with all power always to persevere and endure.⁸ Seek counsel when needed and do not judge harshly those who confide in you of their temptations since you should treat them with the understanding you yourself desire.*

Many evil temptations begin because of our lack of firmness in faith and trust in God. The careless man is like a ship without a rudder being driven back and forth by the waves and his temptations arise likewise. Temptations temper the just man as fire tempers iron into strong steel.

We need to be especially careful at the onset of temptations since the enemy will be overcome more easily at the start and not allowed to enter the mind and heart. Meet him at the door, at the time he seeks entry. The poet Ovid writes: *If moderate emotions touch your heart, then halt your feet, while you can, at the first threshold. Crush the evil germs of sudden illness while they're young, and prevent your horse's gallop at the start.⁹ In the beginning of a temptation there is a simple thought expanded by imagination, followed by delight, and then consent. In this way the enemy slowly gains a foothold if not resisted at the start. The longer one takes in resisting, the weaker one becomes while the enemy*

¹ James 1:14

² 1Peter 5:8

³ Luke 4:2

⁴ Sirach 2:1

⁵ Acts 14:22

⁶ Luke 22:28

⁷ Matthew 12:43-45

⁸ Colossians 1:11

⁹ Ovid, Remedii Amoris i,91

becomes stronger in persisting. This is why our Lord warns us: *I say this to you, if a man looks at a woman lustfully, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*¹⁰

Some people experience more difficult temptations at the beginning of their conversion, other at the end; and some are troubled consistently. St. Anthony of the desert was said to have intense struggles with his own inner demons and asked the Lord, "Where were you in all of this?" His answer was: *Behold, I am with you always.*¹¹

Temptations differ in degree according to God's wisdom which takes into account our conditions and circumstances, allowing all of his chosen to come to salvation. In difficult circumstances we should not despair but pray more fervently for God's help. *None of the trials which have come upon you is more than a human being can stand. You can trust that God will not let you be put to the test beyond your strength, but with any trial will also provide a way out by enabling you to put up with it.*¹² Let us bow down, then, before the power of God, so that he may raise us up in due time¹³, as he always does to the humble in spirit.

Progress in conquering temptation is an indication of our fervor; it brings greater merit and makes our virtue evident. When life is going smoothly it is easier to be devout and prayerful, but in times of adversity patient suffering leads to greater virtue. Some persons are spared from severe temptations but overcome in lesser ones that humble them and make them realize not to be overconfident in themselves as they realize their own frailty.

Keep in mind that *the suffering he himself passed through while being put to the test enables him to help others when they are being put to the test.*¹⁴

(The Dore Gallery)



This article is based on Book 1, Chapter 13 of Thomas of Kempis' writing, "Imitation of Christ." It is not a translation, and there are many of those, but a personal (layperson's) reflection on his writing; if any of it helps give credit to Thomas of Kempis; if any of it fails the responsibility is mine. (rfm)

¹⁰ Matthew 5:28

¹¹ Matthew 28:20

¹² 1Corinthians 10:13

¹³ 1Peter 5:6

¹⁴ Hebrews 2:18