

HOMILY - 1st SUNDAY OF LENT [C] {The Book of Lies }

We are beginning the season of Lent. You may have noticed the purple color, and the absence of the Alleluia. Lent is a time to take stock of our souls, of where our spiritual journey has taken us so far. It's a time for retreat, for prayer and for reconciliation. It's a time for truth-telling: about who we *really* are and about our relationship with God and the people around us. It's a time to repair - and hopefully, a time when many inactive Catholics will come home to the Church. Most of all, it's a time to empty ourselves of the little vices and occasional big sins to make room for the glory of the Resurrection.

To help us understand how emptying can lead to Resurrection, today's Gospel re-introduces us to an old nemesis - the devil. Not the costumed devil of pitchfork, cape and cloven hooves, but the smooth talking seducer who appears in many forms and who has tried to ruin countless souls over the ages and who still seeks to ruin us today. C.S. Lewis once wrote a witty and incisive book on how the devil gets us to do what we don't want to do. The book is the *Screwtape Letters*. It's a series of short letters a senior devil sends to his younger nephew devil on how to help people turn away from God. >Lead me not into temptation - because I can find the way myself! <

It's interesting to note that three Gospels - Matthew, Mark and Luke, all show Jesus beginning his life's work on earth in the same way - by being tempted by the devil. You might have thought they would have started off with wonderful miracles or amazing feats of healing, but Jesus' public ministry begins with his temptations by the devil after Jesus has emptied himself over 40 days in the desert.

Why do these Gospels begin Jesus' ministry with this episode? Why does Jesus even allow the devil to tempt him? And why does the devil use these *particular* temptations on Jesus? Before we look at the answers to those questions, let's first consider three points regarding all temptations.

1. Whatever we may think we are the best at, often provides fertile ground for the devil's temptations. Do we believe we are smart or a good leader of others? Do we think we are good at being kind? Do we imagine we are a real help to others in need? Whenever we pat ourselves on the back for our own goodness, we are actually the most vulnerable to temptation.
2. As C.S. Lewis wrote in *The Screwtape Letters*, the safest road to Hell is the gradual one. Typically, it's not the big sin, or the terrible scandal, but rather the ongoing series of negligences, procrastinations, failures and omissions that lead to fear, blame and bitterness.
3. All temptations are based on a lie. Oh, the lie might seem quite true at the time. It might be that this will be good for me, or that I deserve this, or that no one will ever know about this – but the truth will be that ultimately, someone suffers if I give in to the temptation – even if that someone is me!

Now, let's look at those temptations of Jesus. The devil tempted Jesus in each one of the three key relationships in life. These are: (1) our understanding of who *we* are; (2) our *relationships* with other people, and (3) our relationship *to God*. Jesus knew that, as a human being, he would be tempted just as we are. And, just as the devil does with us, so Jesus was tempted in his most vulnerable areas – areas others might have thought were his greatest triumphs: his healing powers, his being seen as the leader of the people, and his special relationship with God the Father. All three of these matters were important to Jesus, because they could open people to believing in the Kingdom. Which was precisely why the devil honed in on them.

In the first temptation, to change stones into bread, the devil tells Jesus he has worked so hard in the desert; he deserves to at least have some bread – it's only fair that he should use his power to get some bread (that is, implies the devil, if you *really* have these powers). This is the temptation to wrongly understand who I am. This is the lie that says no one really appreciates me; no one knows what I have to go through each

day, no one is aware of the real person inside me. So, if I want to skip Mass or cheat on my taxes or to get angry with those who don't understand, it's o.k. because I deserve it.

To best resist this temptation, we need an honest understanding of who we are. We need to admit in our bones that whatever we have, whatever accolades we are given, are given or inspired by the God who loves us. When we can admit that we need God's help each day just to get through the day; that it's not any action of our own that will ever save us, but God's mercy – then we can understand that we are, in all honesty, a human being in constant need of God's providence and guidance – nothing more and nothing less. Humility is, after all, accepting the truth of who we really are.

In the second temptation, to gain all power over the peoples of the world, the devil plays upon Jesus' love and compassion for all of us. He tells Jesus – You want people to follow you and do good? Then worship me and this power over people will be given to you. This is the lie that says other people exist for *my* benefit, especially when I can tell them my power over them is for their own good.

To resist this temptation, we need to come to a full understanding of the people in our lives. Other people are not in my life for *my* pleasure or manipulation or because I have the answers for their problems. This is looking at the wrong end of the telescope. When I turn this around, I see that *I* am in *someone else's life* so that together, we can help each other along the journey we all share. This is especially true when the other person, according to the world's standards, is someone on the margins, an immigrant, an addict or a "nobody." Each human being was created by God with the divine image on their soul; we are all striving for meaning, for belonging, for love.

The third temptation is the temptation to put God to the test. Here the devil played upon Jesus' intimate relationship with the Father, by saying – You call yourself a human being and also the Son of God – if you really have this special relationship with God, test it out! Throw yourself down from the top of the Temple! This is the temptation that doubts God's love for us. This is the lie that says if God really loved me, God would let me be happy and at peace in this life and give me what I want.

To resist this temptation, we must start by remembering that God is God and we are not. As finite human beings, we cannot know the stories of all other humans or see what will be best for us 5 or 20 years from now. God knows, and the answer to this temptation is to place ourselves in God's hands, as trusting as a child nestling in its mother's lap.

Some might lose heart at this story of Jesus' temptations, thinking that only someone like Jesus could resist these temptations. But that is focusing on us and on human abilities again. The truth is, alone, we cannot resist temptation – it is the Holy Spirit who comes to our aid and fights for us.

Temptations are the glittering pages of the Book of Lies. Whenever we might think we're good enough or smart enough or deserving enough to pick up that book, look instead at the Cross and ask the Lord Jesus for help.

This Lent, let's "give up" our fears, our quickness to judge or gossip about others, our need to be right. Let's empty ourselves of our ego to give God room to bring us to the Resurrection of Easter. How can we do this? St. John of the Cross spelled out one way for us in his classic spiritual book *Ascent of Mount Carmel*,

*To reach satisfaction in all,
desire satisfaction in nothing.
To come to the knowledge of all
desire the knowledge of nothing.
To come to possess all
desire the possession of nothing.
To arrive at being all things to all people,
desire to be nothing.*