

LENT I SUNDAY [A]: GEN 2:7-9, 3:1-7; ROM 5:12-19; MT 4:1-11

The first reading from the book of Genesis (Gen 2:7-9, 3:1-7) describes the "Original Temptation": "*You will be like gods, knowing what is good and what is evil.*" This is the story of the first sin, symbolized by the eating of the forbidden fruit. It tells us that Adam and Eve were given the possibility of making a choice. The fundamental choice was to live for God, dependent upon and obedient to His will.

The second reading (Romans 5:12-19): St. Paul describes how the disobedience of Adam who fell to Satan's Original temptation, brought him and us death and a broken relationship with God. Paul reminds us of the social consequences of sin. Sin is never a private affair, affecting only myself. When we sin, all our relationships are affected: our relationship with our inner self, our relationships with our brothers and sisters, our relationship with our God and our relationship with nature and the world in which we live. Paul says that just as sin and death came through Adam, salvation and life come through Christ. Christ regained for us the right relationship with God that Paul calls justification, which comes to us as undeserved grace.

Today's gospel (Matthew 4: 1-11) teaches us how the 'desert experience' of fasting, praying, and soul-strengthening was a kind of spiritual "training camp" for Jesus which enabled him to confront his temptations successfully and then to preach the good news of salvation. The gospel also prescribes a dual action plan for Lent: (1) We should confront our temptations and conquer them as Jesus did, by fasting, prayer and the Word of God. (2) We should renew our lives by true repentance and live the 'good news' of God's love, mercy and forgiveness.

The graphic descriptions of the temptations of Jesus given in Matthew and Luke are sometimes interpreted as the dramatic presentation of a single temptation Jesus experienced throughout his public life. The three temptations - *turn stones into bread* (4:3); *jump off the Temple pinnacle* (4:6); *worship Satan* (4:9) - demonstrate three kinds of control: material, spiritual and civil. They correspond to three wrong evaluations: 1) those who have material resources are blessed by God; 2) those who have spiritual powers are blessed by God; 3) those who have national power are blessed by God. These, in turn, correspond to three human-divine bargains: 1) I will worship you if you make me rich; 2) I will worship you if you endow me with magical powers; and 3) I will worship you if you give me political power. These temptations of Jesus are traditionally treated as archetypes of the temptations we experience: the temptation to satisfy personal needs by material possessions, the temptation to perform miraculous deeds by spiritual power and the temptation to seek political power and social influence. But Jesus dismisses the temptations using the Word of God. He quotes the Law from Scripture itself: "*One does not live by bread alone*" (Deuteronomy 8:3); "*Do not put the Lord your God to the test*" (6:16); "*Worship the Lord, your God*" (6:13).

The first temptation could not have been better timed. Jesus had been fasting for forty days. He was entitled to eat. Even Israel in the Old Testament was miraculously fed with manna. Why not the Son of God? "Turn these stones into loaves of bread. Use your power to satisfy your physical need. You are entitled to food after a forty-day fast." The temptation was that Jesus use his miraculous powers to provide for himself. This first temptation of Jesus was not merely the urge to satisfy his hunger by some miraculous deed. It also had implications as to how Jesus would respond to the physical needs of others, especially their need for food. Matthew tells us, for example, that Jesus miraculously fed a multitude of people (14:13-21 and 15:32-39). Jesus would be seen as the messiah who provided for their pressing needs.

The very seat of religious life, namely, the sacred precincts of the Temple itself became the scene of the second temptation. The devil was suggesting that, on the basis of Scripture, Jesus must believe in and insist on divine protection: if he *were* the Son of God he had the right to expect safety and protection from his heavenly Father. Here Jesus is pressured either to identify Himself as God's Son and Messiah, or to discredit His mission by apparently either denying His trust in God, the truth of Scripture or His own right to speak in God's Name. An additional temptation for Jesus was to use his miraculous powers to amaze people and thereby attract followers.

In the third temptation, the devil wanted Jesus to enter the world of political power to establish his kingdom of God instead of choosing the path that might lead to suffering, humiliation and death. It was a temptation to do the right thing using the wrong means. Jesus was being tempted to win the world by worshipping the devil. Why not compromise a bit? Why not strike a deal with the evil powers. Spirit-filled, sanctified, spiritually vibrant Christians are still subject to the same temptation. We need companionship, acceptance, the approval of others, love and appreciation. We are tempted to fulfill these legitimate needs using the wrong means.

Every one of us is tempted to seek sinful pleasures, easy wealth and a position of authority, power and glory, and to use any means, even unjust or sinful ones to gain these things. Jesus serves as a model for us in conquering temptations by strengthening himself through prayer, penance and the active use of the 'Word of God'. Temptations make us more powerful warriors of God by strengthening our minds and hearts. By constantly struggling against temptations we become stronger. Each time one is tempted to do evil but does good, one becomes stronger. Further, we are never tempted beyond our power. In his first letter, St. John assures us: "*Greater is the one who is in us, than the one who is in the world (1 John 4: 4)*. We may be strengthened by St. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 10:13: "*No testing has overtaken you, that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and [God] will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing [God] will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.*" Hence, during this Lent, let us confront our evil tendencies by prayer (especially by participating in the holy Mass), by penance and by meditative reading of the Bible. Let us grow in holiness

by prayer, reconciliation and sharing during Lent by finding time to be with God every day of Lent, speaking to Him in fervent prayer and listening to Him through the meditative reading of the Bible.

(Taken from the Scriptural Homilies)