

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent, 26 February 2023

Scriptures: Gen. 2:7-9; 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matt. 4:1-11

Homily: Fr. Ken

A few years ago, the students of our Confirmation program were joined together with other religious education students from San Francisco at Mission Dolores Basilica in the Mission District, for a full one-day Confirmation spiritual retreat, focusing on the Bible.

At lunch time, the students went outside in the school yard to eat and play ball. At some point, one of our students kicked the ball into a group of much younger students knocking one of them down. Carol Bennetts and I immediately went outside. Carol yelled: "Who did that?" At first the students pointed at each other. Then, one boy finally shouted: "It's not my fault; the devil made me do it". Suddenly, they knew the Bible.

The temptation to blame others for our wrongdoings and failures goes back a long way. The biblical account of the Garden of Eden is not so much about human origins as about human nature. The story of Adam and Eve is the story of men and women today. Beneath the poetical descriptions of the garden, the trees, and the snake, there is the reality of people wanting to escape their personal responsibilities. When God confronts Adam for eating the forbidden fruit, what does the man do? He blames the woman. Likewise she shifts the blame to the snake. Nobody will admit responsibility. It is a story that spotlights a constant temptation in human behavior—to make excuses for oneself and lay blame at someone else's door.

In today's Gospel, Jesus faced the responsibility of who he was and what he was called to be. His temptation in the desert was a deep inner conflict within his mind and heart. Religious art has

made much of the details of the wilderness, the jagged rocks, and the prowling beasts, but could never capture the truth of Jesus' painful inner struggles.

Shortly before, at his Baptism in the Jordan River, Jesus had received extraordinary powers from the Holy Spirit to prepare him for his life's work as Messiah and savior. His temptations were to use these powers for immediate success and avoid the way of the cross.

Often temptations initially appear to be good. The first temptation, to turn stones into bread, was an appeal to Jesus' compassion and sense of people's needs, not only to satisfy his own hunger. If, by his miraculous powers, he provided a constant supply of food for those who were poor he would be proclaimed as a popular hero. His task as Messiah would be easier. But would that not be bribing people with material gifts instead of winning them by his teaching and character, an easy shortcut that would avoid the difficult way of the cross? He knew that the souls of people needed more than material bread in their lives and that, according to God's will, his destiny was to become "the bread of life" for all people.

The second temptation was to do something spectacular. If he were to demonstrate his power by throwing himself from the top of the Temple and remaining unharmed, would not that prove to the amazed crowd that he was the Messiah? He would gain their admiration and applause, but was that what God really wanted? Do you appeal to people's lower nature, their love of sensationalism, in order to win their souls?

The third temptation was to compromise, to fall back on worldly means and political power to bring about the kingdom of God. It was a subtle challenge to Jesus' deal of self-giving love. His decision to give his utmost for God would inspire Christians throughout the ages to die rather than compromise their faith.

A temptation is not a sin in itself, but sometimes can lead to sin. It puts people at a crossroads—do we give way or take a stand on the side of conscience?

We can also think of Lent as a crossroads. It is an invitation to renew our faith. Do we take the opportunity of a fresh beginning or do we leave things as they are? Do we take a step forward or do we slip backward? There is no standing still in the Christian life.

One of life's biggest challenges is discouragement. Family quarrels, difficulties at work, the break-up of relationships, can narrow our vision to look only at the problems, and fail to bring God into the bigger picture. We may be tempted to give up responsibility for ourselves and our future and to see ourselves as victims. Christians through the ages have overcome this temptation not so much by trying to force themselves into a different state of mind but by sincere and trustful prayer to Jesus. As the Letter to the Hebrews says, "because he himself has been through temptation, he is able to help others who are tempted".

This Lent, then, let each of us here consciously and courageously renew our Christian commitment and responsibility.

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