

Temptation 2-22-15 (Lindsay)

Mark tells us today that Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the desert where He was tempted by Satan. It is in Mark's unique style: short and to the point. What does it mean that Jesus was 'driven' by the Spirit? Here in Texas we think of being driven as being forced or compelled like driving cattle. We speak of being 'driven' to drink or being 'driven' to commit a crime. To be 'driven' to do something smacks of being forced to do something against our will so that we don't really have a choice. So it is a little jarring to think of Jesus being 'driven' to do anything, let alone being driven by the Holy Spirit. Matthew and Luke say Jesus was 'led' by the Spirit into the desert so maybe it is acceptable to think of it that way.

Why is Jesus being tempted in the desert the gospel reading for the first Sunday in Lent? The obvious answer is that we are to emulate Jesus by going into our own desert in order to repent and believe the gospel. That's what Lent is all about. After all, that's what Jesus tells us to do at the end of this gospel. But what about

Jesus? He certainly did not need to repent for any sins or misdeeds. For some reason it was necessary that Jesus be tempted.

This brings us to one of the fundamental mysteries of the faith: the Incarnation; the fact that Jesus was a human being. And how could Jesus be human and not be tempted? It can be reduced to a syllogism: All humans are tempted. Jesus was a human. Therefore Jesus was tempted. As we are told, Jesus was like us in every way but sin. So, He was tempted as we all are tempted. The difference is He never gave in.

Oftentimes, as a priest I find that there is a confusion between sin and temptation. Being tempted is not a sin. But what causes confusion, I think, is that in the course of being tempted we can dwell on the instant pleasure derived if we give in to the temptation. Consider the example I often use, robbing a bank. I think it was 'Pretty Boy' Floyd, the infamous bank robber during the Depression who when he was asked. 'Why do you rob banks?' answered, 'Because that's where the money is.' Who hasn't had at least the fleeting thought of how nice it would be to get your hands on all the

money in a bank? Riches without effort! How sweet is that? But (almost) everyone resists the temptation for at least this reason: it is highly unlikely to be gotten away with. And the immediate consequences are terrible. Maybe death, disgrace and a lengthy prison term. But the deeper, more noble reason is that it is simply wrong. It is immoral and against God's Law. So (I hope) most of us wouldn't rob a bank even if there was no chance of getting caught.

But most of our temptations are more mundane and we have to make snap decisions whether or not we are going to give in to a temptation on a moment by moment basis. If you are tempted to say something sarcastic or mean spirited, you are tempted right on the spot and must make a decision there and then. If you are tempted to cheat on a test by looking on someone else's paper, it is a decision made in a matter of seconds. Our life is full of these little opportunities (if it can be called an opportunity).

A temptation is a lie. It is the idea that an illicit instant pleasure can be had without the bad consequences. In other words it is a short cut to the promised land. When we are in full use of our

faculties we can usually see the lie and resist. A temptation is an invitation to embrace the irrational. This is why drunkenness and drugs are so bad. Aside from the adverse cost to our health, it lowers our ability to see through the lie of a temptation and makes bad decisions more likely. The irrational seems to be rational. The consequences for an action seem to be far away and non threatening. How many times have you heard, 'That's the beer talking' when someone says something stupid while drinking?

Drawing closer to God is a moment by moment experience. So is moving away from God. This is why earlier I called temptations opportunities. Each temptation is an invitation to draw closer to God. That is an opportunity. A good example is having the opportunity to say something mean and cutting. What is the reward? The instant gratification of approval and laughter. Gaining the reputation of being witty. Being able to wound and hurt without being physical and getting into trouble. But notice how short lived this is! The buzz or high lasts only for a minute. The downside? You could gain an enemy that will take a disproportionate revenge later.

And, more importantly you move away from God. But what if you forgo saying the mean and cutting remark? You have resisted a temptation. You have the secret knowledge that you could have gotten applause and laughter, but you didn't do it. You resisted. And you draw closer to God.

This Lent think of your life as an endless series of opportunities to draw closer to God. Making a decision for God isn't usually some grand and noble exercise that will solve some gigantic evil in the world. No, making a decision for God is a moment by moment quiet moving towards the Good, the True and the Beautiful.