

HOMILY LENT SUNDAY 1-C

“The Temptations of Jesus”

(Dt 26:4-10; Psalm 91; Rm 10:8-13; Lk 4:1-13)

Why is it impossible to starve in a desert? - Because we can always eat the sandwiches under our feet!

Have you ever struggled with a personal defect of character?

Today, the first Sunday of Lent, we are invited to follow Jesus into the desert to face our own personal demons.

To be a Catholic Christian involves more than just believing a body of truths or keeping rules. It is dynamic and alive. It means to follow a person, Jesus of Nazareth, and to journey with him through our own Paschal Mystery into freedom.

From the years 1985 to 1990, I was troubled with nightmares in which I dreamt that I was being bitten by animals, falling off trains, or threatened with knives in some way. Waking up from one particularly scary dream, I cried out loud to warn my brother Oblate in the room next to me in our Oblate cabin at Amyot lake. I shared the dream with him later and he simply advised me to deal with my demons. Years later, I learned that those dreams were warning me that I was on the wrong path – that my demons of work-a-holism and co-dependency were threatening to cause me harm if I did not change my life-style. I needed to deal with my demons.

The Israelites in the desert had to deal with their demons also. After God had miraculously and powerfully freed them from slavery in Egypt; after he had given them a new covenant way of life; after he made Israel a son of God, they consistently failed to live up to that covenant of trust. They were not able to resist the temptations they faced in the Promised Land. They were tempted to think that their happiness lay in land, false pride and power over others instead of relying on faith in God’s love for them. They consistently gave in to these temptations. They needed to deal with their demons.

We are also faced with those same, primordial, age-old temptations. The temptations can be summed up as “Appetite, Ambition, and Arrogance”, or “Possessions, Power and Prestige”. And just like the Israelites, we consistently fall for them, over and over. All we have to do is watch the news on any given night to see that, or reflect on our own behaviour on any given day, and we will see that we are hardly any better than the Hebrew people in the desert. What are we to do?

The answer is simple. Put our faith in Jesus and follow him through our own desert to a new way of life. It is Jesus who is the true Son of God and the New Israel. That is why immediately after his baptism in the Jordan where God’s voice declared that he was his Son, Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the desert. In his own person he had to face the same temptations that Israel had faced. And of course, he alone is totally and finally

victorious over those temptations. Filled with the Spirit, Jesus lets go of all possession, political power and glory, to establish God's reign on earth through total obedience and self denial. This is also our mission and call, and he alone can empower us to deal with our demons and overcome them.

Lent is a time for us to prepare to celebrate in that victory, by experiencing it in our own lives now. The same temptations that faced Jesus face us each day. In cunning, baffling and powerful ways, the Evil One tempts us with those same three basic temptations: possessions, prestige and power. The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous lists them as money, fame and power.

We are tempted to *possess, to turn rocks into bread*, to think that getting high on drugs, alcohol or glue; that winning at bingo or gambling; that having more and more money or possessions, will make us happy. That is the first temptation.

We are also tempted to seek *prestige, to throw ourselves down from the temple*, to be sensational. This shows up especially when we gossip and put others down to make ourselves feel and look better. It shows up when we use even religion to seek a constant high, to avoid the painful realities of our feelings and our suffering relationships - the second temptation.

Lastly, we are tempted to *power, to have all the kingdoms of the world*. This shows up in our attempt to always be in control, to always have it our way. The latest addiction that I have learned about is the addiction to being right! We are tempted to be stubborn and narrow, to be in charge all the time, to not listen to others but rather to impose our will and ideas on them, to be a lone-ranger, to want power over others - the third temptation.

An article I read on Madonna in Time magazine illustrates this sad reality. She was quoted as saying that she uses her sex appeal or fame to make money because that gives her power. There it was – she was blatantly falling for all three temptations.

Another more current example is the tragic life of Anna Nicole Smith who wanted to be a modern-day Marilyn Munroe. She had money, fame and power, yet towards the end of her life she told one Talk Show host that she suffered from loneliness and was unhappy. The controversy around her death and the fate of her six month old daughter swirls on as these words are being written.

How can we deal with these demons, you might ask? The key to new freedom for us is found in the readings.

First, we can listen to the Word of God, like Jesus in the gospels. He responds to each temptation with scripture. Second, we can pray to Jesus as saviour, out of our poverty and need. "Be with me, Lord, when I am in trouble" is the Psalm response. The reading from Romans reminds us that "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Second, we can enter into fellowship. We can share our struggles difficulties and feelings with a soul-mate. Grief shared is grief diminished. “To be close to God, be closer to people” is one way of putting it. We can witness to others, confess with our lips who we are and whom we believe God to be, and we will experience strength and healing.

Third, we can be grateful for God’s blessings which lead to happiness. A grateful person is a happy person. The most striking quality of the powerful and unswerving faith displayed by Corrie and Betsy Ten Boom in the movie “The Hiding Place” is their unfaltering gratitude for God’s blessings, even in the midst of unspeakable sufferings in a concentration camp, even in the face of death. Though in prison, they were already free in their spirit. Such is the gift of faith.

As Catholics, we are truly privileged – with faith we can receive the Body and Blood of Jesus, the faithful one who alone resisted the temptations of Satan, and who empowers us to go out and do likewise.

So, this Lent, let go and let God. Put your faith in Jesus, the Faithful one, and follow him through the darkness of our own lives to the freedom and joy he alone can give.