

Homily **1st Sunday in Lent - Year C** (10.3.19)

I made a firm resolve this year, but the big temptation, I think is, for me anyway, on the first Sunday of Lent, the big temptation, and I wonder how many others share this temptation, is to do nothing different whatsoever. Anybody guilty?

[laughter]

And it's so easy to give in to that temptation. It's just another day. But today's gospel is powerful in showing us why we must do something in Lent.

But just as an aside, for the moment, something not related. I love this gospel because of all the Scripture that gets quoted by the evil one and Jesus, and it's a classic example to remind us that scripture is not a lucky dip.

And you know, Evangelical Christians often throw bits of scripture here to prove a point and scripture is not a proof text. I'm very tempted always, like Jesus, when they do, to quote one back that contradicts what they have said, because it shows you it can't be used as a weapon. It can't be used as something to tie you down with one image, because it's a vision, an insight to the proximity of God. It's not meant to be a catechism. It's meant to be something that inspires and moves us nearer towards God.

Anyway, I've got rid of my pet thing. So I was looking at these three temptations and I was saying to myself,

"You could preach on what they meant for Jesus in His own historical context when He walked upon this earth."

But I was led to sort of try to think what they meant for me in this current 21st century. So when the tempter says to Him,

"Turn this stone into a loaf"

Jesus is at the end of a fast and what the tempter is saying really is,

"You've got this power. Just do it to feed yourself and end your fast."

Now, what does it mean for us? Well, I think it is a symbol. It is this turning the stone into a loaf is a symbol of independence from God and others. I provide for myself. You can even see those people you probably bump into who say

' I've no sympathy for those on the street or on the breadline. They haven't done the right thing, they haven't looked after themselves. So, I don't care about the fact they've failed.'

This is the deranged attitude of self-sufficiency, and it cuts you off from relationship and compassion for others. So Jesus replies,

"Man does not live on bread alone."

And Jesus' reply suits our day very much, because it's not about a materialistic, self-satisfying luxury, because that doesn't fulfil or satisfy in the end. It's about developing an inner person, a spiritual life.

And then the second temptation, the tempter says after he shows Him all the kingdoms of the world and says,

"Bow down and worship me and all of this can be yours."

Well, in Jesus' day, of course, most leaders were tyrants or absolute monarchs and totally ruled over other people in an absolute manner.

And it was thought to be a wonderful thing to have power. But what does it mean for us? I think it's to do with domination. Well, we've had a lot of it on the news, haven't we with accounts of coercive behaviour and control. I think it's about domination, power over others.

"Others serve me. I am the centre of the universe and everybody should bow down to me."

It's also about self.

Self-fulfilment. There's no fulfilment in self, because we only know our true self by the relationship we have to others. So Jesus says,

"You must worship the Lord your God and serve Him alone."

In other words, worship me is a failure because you are setting yourself up as a false god but worshipping God draws us out of ourselves.

And then the third temptation,

"Throw yourself off the parapet here and you will be saved," if you are truly who you say you are because God's angels will protect you. It was in the Psalm we read now: in effect they will protect you and stop you hurting your foot against the stone. And for Jesus, the temptation was to misuse his mission, switching on His divinity to reveal Himself in His true nature. But Jesus emptied Himself to become like us in everything except sin, and assumed of a slave. But I wondered what it could mean for us that temptation. I think it's about being invulnerable. Nothing can touch me. I can overcome anything. No sense of limitations. I'm the all-powerful person. And the problem with that is, again, it's a destruction of community. There can be no community when nothing can touch me or move me.

And Jesus replies,

"You must not put the Lord your God to the test." In other words, you mustn't test that invulnerability of yourself, because you might find yourself wanting. And so Lent in prayer, fasting and alms-giving, and taking on something different is about shaping and forming character, so that when we face those terrible temptations, in renunciation of self. And ultimately, it's admitting before God that we are not the centre of the universe but He is.