

1 Sunday of Lent, Year A

Temptation is a strange and mysterious experience. No one seems to be quite sure of what it is or how to handle it. We are both frightened by it and drawn to it. We try to ignore it, but it will not go away. We make jokes about it, but all know that it really isn't funny.

Today's gospel reading tells the story of the temptation of Jesus in the desert. It contains some mysteries. There are questions about it which we cannot answer. But it also contains some obvious truths. For one thing, we know that it was a real temptation. Jesus really struggled with himself and faced some real issues. He won his battle there in the wilderness; and because he did, we can learn some lessons from his experience.

This episode in the life of our Lord reminds us, first of all, who must deal with temptation. In this case, it was none other than God's own Son. Some people have wondered if Jesus was truly tempted. The answer to that is always "yes." Whatever Jesus was, he was not a stage player. His life was not a game of make-believe. He was a real man, living a real life; and his temptations were just as real as those of any other man.

The letter to the Hebrews says that he "was tempted in every way that we are." Think of that. Every kind of temptation that we face, Jesus has already faced. He knows what we are going through.

Now the implication in all of this is obvious. If Jesus had to deal with temptation, then temptation must be a universal experience. None of us will ever become so wise, so good, or so strong that we no longer have to deal with it. I remember that Paul wrote this advice to the Corinthians: “Let anyone who thinks he is standing upright watch out lest he fall.”

In this life, you and I will never outgrow temptation. Jesus had to deal with it; and so will we, in one form or another, just as long as we live.

Our Lord’s experience also gives us some insight into when we are tempted. This particular temptation came when Jesus was alone in the wilderness. The crowds had been left behind at the Jordan River. This is significant. It seems to me that it is fairly easy to live a good life in the public eye. When our behavior is under scrutiny, when our conduct is being evaluated, then it isn’t too difficult to stand tall and walk straight. But when that moment comes that we can convince ourselves that no one will ever know, that is the real time of temptation and the true test of character.

This special event in the life of Jesus also teaches us something about how we are tempted. On this occasion, Jesus was confronted by three different temptations. The first was to turn stones into bread that he might eat. This involved much more than the working of a miracle in order to ease his own hunger. It had to do with the direction of his life and the emphasis of his ministry. It was a temptation to place the

material above the spiritual. You and I will be faced with that same temptation as long as we live. This is a material world. We have to deal with certain material necessities. We need food to eat, and that takes money. There is rent to pay, and that takes money. The children need shoes and clothes, and that takes money. There is no escaping the material necessities of living, and all of our lives we must deal with the temptation to elevate those above spiritual imperatives.

The second temptation that came to Jesus was to jump from the parapet of the temple and test the promise that the angels would prevent him from harm. Now, this temptation is a little more difficult for us to identify with. We can hardly imagine jumping from the top of a building to see if angels would catch us. But we can imagine using our faith in God as a magic formula instead of a moral force. God's purpose in our live is to redeem us from sin, not to miraculously rescue us from our own stupidity.

The final temptation of Jesus had to do with gaining the world. Satan took him to the top of a mountain, showed him all the kingdoms of the world and said, "All these will I give to you if you prostrate yourself in homage to me." I can understand why that was a temptation to Jesus. He had come to win this world to himself, and this might be the way to do it. He had to choose between persuasion and coercion, between force and love. He stood at a fork in the road. One way offered fame and power, the other offered suffering and a cross. One looked so swift and

sure and simple, the other looked so slow and hard. But Jesus made his decision, and chose the hard way instead of the short-cut.

We face a similar temptation. The right thing, for some reason, always seems to be the hard thing. It's easier to loaf than work, easier to hate than love, easier to give in to temptation than to overcome it. But this experience of Jesus also tells us how to do the right thing. He did it by answering Satan with scripture. His soul was fortified with the word of God. We can do the same thing. Then also we need to stay very close. He is the only one who ever fought this battle successfully, but with his help we can win it too.