

Homily for the First Sunday of Lent, Year A

February 26, 2023

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7 (The sin of Adam and Eve.)

Responsory: Psalm 51 (Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.)

Second Reading: Romans 5:12-19 (Through one righteous act, acquittal and life came to all.)

Gospel: Matthew 4:1-11 (The temptations in the desert.)

The devil may be a formidable tempter, but he's no match for Jesus. Every attempt to manipulate Jesus falls flat. Jesus sees right through every trick, and skillfully avoids every trap. He holds fast to his principles and his priorities, as he draws upon the *Word of God* as his most effective weapon. Every attempt at deception is countered with a stiff dose of *truth* from the Scriptures.

This story, while highly entertaining, is also quite instructive for all of us Christians. The three temptations are not simply random attempts to trip up Jesus. Each one is carefully directed at a weak spot in our human nature. The devil knows where human beings are most vulnerable, and those are the areas that he probes, hoping that Jesus will succumb as easily as we often do. If we carefully study Jesus' responses, we might pick up some helpful tips that we can apply whenever we face similar trials.

In the first temptation, Jesus is physically hungry, but he refuses to turn stones into bread in order to satisfy his hunger. He quotes from the Book of Deuteronomy, where Moses tells the Israelites that God first allowed them to go hungry and then fed them with manna in order to teach them an important lesson: "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." By first causing and then alleviating their hunger, God was trying to teach his people to recognize their *deeper* needs and turn to him for *spiritual* nourishment. In other words, God wanted to fill their *souls*, not just their stomachs.

Voluntary fasting, if done wisely, can teach us that same lesson. By denying certain bodily appetites for a time, we can learn to understand their relative importance in our lives. Hunger and thirst are necessary, because they help us to regulate our nutrition and keep us healthy. Other appetites and cravings for physical sensations can also play a constructive role in our lives. *But*, all of them can also get out-of-hand. We can easily get in the habit of indulging one or more of our appetites to an unhealthy extreme. And when we do, we find ourselves losing our self-control and neglecting our *deeper* desires. We forget that human beings are bodily *and* spiritual creatures, who live not by bread alone, but by "every word that comes from the mouth of God." Whatever form of fasting we may choose to try during this Lenten season, it should draw us into this mystery, reminding us of our deep, abiding hunger *for God*.

A secondary benefit of fasting is that it can show us just how attached we have become to certain pleasures. We may not realize how much a particular sensation or activity has come to dominate our lives until we try to give it up. Jesus' response to the first temptation can be a reminder for us that *we do have a choice* when confronted by bodily desires. Not only can we

delay our gratification, but we can use that delay as an opportunity to reflect on our deeper desires. As much as we need to listen to our bodies, we need to listen to our hearts even more.

After having his first temptation thwarted by the Word of God, the devil tries to use the Word of God to his advantage in the next temptation. Psalm 91 speaks about angels protecting us, lest we get hurt. So, the devil suggests, why not throw yourself down from the parapet of the Temple to prove you are the Son of God? The devil is daring Jesus to prove God's faithfulness by deliberately putting himself in grave danger and forcing God to save him. Jesus responds with another biblical teaching: "You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test." Even without that little bit of wisdom from the Scriptures, we should all realize that the best way to verify God's faithfulness to us is not to endanger ourselves, but to listen to God's voice, follow in his way, and see how well that turns out for us. Then we can compare that outcome to the times when we have chosen to ignore God's will and go our own way instead. The Psalm quoted by the devil is about God protecting his faithful ones from those who would harm them, not God protecting us from our own stupidity. The Psalmist is proved correct when we *obey* the Lord's will, not when we *disobey* it. God's angels guard and support us by keeping us away from dangerous and foolish endeavors, not by rescuing us from the consequences of our bad decisions. Jesus shows us how to listen to and obey God's will, rather than trying to impose *our will* on God.

In the final temptation, Jesus is invited to grasp at personal power and glory, without considering the cost. The devil tries to convince him that worshipping Satan is a small price to pay to have other people bow down before him and constantly do his bidding. This is the lie that seduces many politicians, celebrities, star athletes, billionaires, and even clergy. The desire to be *adored* by others, to be put on a pedestal and admired for our success, our skills, our intelligence, our power, or any other gift that we may possess, is a very dangerous temptation. It can lead to egregious abuses of power and a false sense of superiority. Jesus counters this temptation by simply recalling the first commandment of the Law, that *God alone* is worthy of adoration. People in positions of power must always remember that fundamental truth. All of us should strive to be role models, but *none of us* should want to be anyone's idol.

After Jesus successfully navigates his way through all three of these temptations, the devil finally relents and leaves him. However, Jesus' battle against evil is far from over. He was sent into the world to confront sin and death and win a final, definitive victory over them. But, to do that, Jesus would need more than clever argumentation and a deft use of Scripture. He would have to hand over his life, in *total obedience to the Father's will*. That's how we win the victory over evil, too, by handing over *our wills* and *our lives* to the Lord. Every Lenten season offers us a new opportunity to examine where we are falling short in that regard. This is our chance to examine ourselves closely and see which temptations are getting the better of us, and how we can rise above them. Let us study Jesus and his responses, and imitate his example of obedience, self-denial and faith. Perhaps we can come out on top in our struggles with temptation, just as he did.