

DO NOT LET THE LENGTH OF THIS HOMILY INTIMIDATE YOU. I PRAY THAT YOU ARE FLOURISHING IN THE LORD EVEN AS WE ARE SNOWED IN.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT, FEBRUARY 21, 2021, YEAR B

The Lord's temptation and the call to repentance.

Dearly Beloved in Christ,

The reading from the gospel according to Mark in this first Sunday of Lent speaks of the temptation of the Lord and his first preaching after the temptation. As is typical of Mark's gospel, the story of the temptation was summarized. So, for the sake of a more detailed account, we look at Matthew and Luke's version of this event. Let us first point to an element unique to Mark's account. It is the presence of the wild animals at the place of the Lord's temptation. What does this mean? The presence of the animal in the wilderness at the site of the temptation evokes two images - the image of the desert as a dangerous place and a paradise motif of the harmony in nature at the coming of the Messiah. Isaiah spoke about this - "The wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat; The calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them" (Isaiah 11:6). This tells that Jesus is the awaited Messiah. The Messiah will restore the harmony that existed prior to the disobedience of Adam and Eve.

The Messiah could do this because he had the fullness of the Spirit of God. "The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: a spirit of wisdom and of understanding, A spirit of counsel and of strength, a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the LORD" (Isaiah 11:2). This recalls the event of the Baptism of the Lord. The Evangelists, Matthew and Luke indicated that the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove. The voice of the Father declared Jesus the beloved Son of God. "And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22).

During the Temptation, the devil attacked our Lord's identity as the Son of God. The Holy Spirit, whom the Son has in fullness, would lead him into

the wilderness to battle and vanquish the adversary who wanted to keep man in bondage and rob him of eternal communion with God. In a threefold [round of] combat, our Lord took the enemy down by standing firm on his mission of bringing salvation to the world in obedience to the Father. The adversary, satan, proposed three unholy alternatives. Jesus rebutted and rejected them all. Mark does not go into the details about these unholy alternatives. But Matthew and Luke did. Following Matthew's order, we have three temptations from the adversary: First, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread" (Matthew 4:3). Second, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will give his angels charge of you,' and on their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone " (Matthew 4:6). Third, taking our Lord to a very high mountain, the tempter showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me "(Matthew 4:7-9).

Our Lord responded. To the first temptation using the word of God in Deuteronomy 6:3, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Deuteronomy 8:3). To the second temptation, our Lord said, "Again it is written, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 6:16)' To the third, our Lord ordered, "Begone, Satan! for it is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve" (Deuteronomy 6:13).

It is noteworthy that our Lord inaugurated his public ministry with baptism - his acceptance to be counted among sinners and to suffer for the same. Right after the baptism, he went into the wilderness. There he wrestled with the one who had pulled our first parents down from the original state of innocence and holiness. By allowing himself to be tempted our Lord recapitulated the history of humanity beginning from the Garden of Eden to the period of the journey through the desert. "It is a descent into the perils besetting mankind, for there is no other way to lift up fallen humanity. Jesus has to enter into the drama of human existence, for that belongs to the core of his mission; he has to penetrate it completely, down to its uttermost depths, in order to find the "lost sheep," to bear it on his

shoulders and to bring it home." Where our first parents and Israel failed, He won. The Church, our holy Mother, makes this clear, "Satan tempts Jesus three times, seeking to compromise his filial attitude toward God. Jesus rebuffs these attacks, which recapitulate the temptations of Adam in Paradise and of Israel in the desert, and the devil leaves him "until an opportune time" (CCC 538).

What is at stake in the Lord's temptation? Pope Benedict XVI insightfully noted, "At the heart of all temptations is the act of pushing God aside, because we perceive Him as secondary, if not actually superfluous and annoying, in comparison all the apparently far more urgent matters that fill our lives. Constructing a world...without reference to God, building on our own foundation, refusing to acknowledge the reality of anything beyond the political and material, while setting God aside as an illusion – that is the temptation that threatens us in many varied ways."

How does this apply to you? Is your attitude to life a cavalier position? Is the only thing that matters the satisfaction of our immediate material needs? Are you of the mindset that economics and politics are what is most important? Do you tend to be impatient and uncomfortable with the questions of God? Do you tend to relegate religion to the area of the private, subjective and unimportant? Do you uphold the communist view that God's questions are unnecessary? Do you proffer help devoid of God and sacredness of life? Is the "aid" that the West sometimes give to the developing countries not often tied to the sinister agenda of reducing the populations of the beneficiary countries? "Insofar those aids have nothing to do with God, it debases man and gives him stone instead of bread. Pope Benedict noted, "The issue is the primacy of God. The issue is acknowledging that he is a reality, that he is the reality without which nothing else can be good. History cannot be detached from God and then run smoothly on purely material lines. If man's heart is not good, then nothing else can turn out good, either. And the goodness of the human heart can ultimately come only from the One who is goodness, who is the Good itself."

The Pope explained further that, "It is in this world that we are obliged to resist the delusions of false philosophies and to recognize that we do not live by bread alone, but first and foremost by obedience to God's word. Only when this obedience is put into practice does the attitude develop that is also capable of providing bread for all."

With the second temptation we see a kind of theological debate between our Lord and the enemy. As in the first temptation, what is at stake is what is the image of God we are working with? Do you think of God as one who can be subjected to laboratory tests and if he does not meet your criterion then you toss him? Does not such thinking amount to making yourself into a god? Do you create and construct god in your image rather than conform to the image of God, modelled in his beloved Son? "The arrogance that would make God an object and impose our laboratory conditions upon him is incapable of finding Him. For it already implies that we deny God as God by placing ourselves above him, by discarding the whole dimension of love, of interior listening; by no longer acknowledging as real anything but what we can experimentally test and grasp. To think like that is to make oneself God. And to do that is to abase not only God, but the world and oneself, too."

Third temptation, do you tend to think that Jesus cannot be God because he lacked have paraphernalia of worldly power? Do you think that worldly power is the only true power? Do you think that only dollars and cents count? Do you evaluate people based on how much material wealth they have? Do you look down on people because they are humble? Do you deny the humanity of the unborn because they are defenseless and vulnerable? The only power that is true power is the power of love. "Only when power submits to the measure and the judgement of heaven----of God, in other words---- can it become power for good. And only one when power stands under God's blessing can it be trusted."

Do the temptations and trials of life have any usefulness? St Augustine answered in affirmation, saying, "Our pilgrimage on earth cannot be exempt from trial. We progress by means of trial. No one knows himself except through trial, or receives a crown except after victory, or strives except against an enemy or temptations."

Another aspect of the message today is repentance. Oftentimes, it appears we talk glowingly about evangelization and nothing about the call to repentance. It seems we are shy or hesitant to call sin by its name. In that same spirit not, many people go to confession. When we do this are we not halving the gospel of the Lord? To soar to God like an eagle we need two wings of the evangelization and the call to repentance. The Lord said, "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). In his letter to the Corinthians, Pope St Clement reminded us this, "Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the ministers of God's grace have spoken of repentance; indeed, the Master of the whole universe himself spoke of repentance with an oath: As I live, says the Lord, I do not wish the death of the sinner but his repentance. He added this evidence of his goodness: Repent O house of Israel and turn from your wickedness. Say to the children of my people, though your sins may stretch from earth to heaven, and though they may be redder than scarlet, and blacker than sackcloth, yet if you turn wholeheartedly to me and say, Father, I will listen to you as I would to the people that were holy."

Christ is the perfect exemplar or model of what the Father wants us to be. "Jesus is the new Adam who remained faithful just where the first Adam had given in to temptation. Jesus fulfills Israel's vocation perfectly: in contrast to those who had once provoked God during forty years in the desert, Christ reveals himself as God's Servant, totally obedient to the divine will. In this, Jesus is the devil's conqueror: he "binds the strong man" to take back his plunder. Jesus' victory over the tempter in the desert anticipates victory at the Passion, the supreme act of obedience of his filial love for the Father" (CCC 539).

How do all the three readings tie together? The first reading shows Noah to be a righteous man. He did not succumb to the temptation to sin like the rest of his contemporaries. Scripture speaks of this, "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God. He obeyed and built the ark" (Genesis 9:6). He was a prototype of Christ the Lord. Because of this man's integrity, all of creation would never suffer A deluge again. The Lord entered into a covenant with NOAH and all of

creation saying to him, "I will establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all bodily creatures be destroyed by the waters of a flood; there shall not be another flood to devastate the earth." This foreshadows what Christ did for all. "As one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men" (Romans 5:18). This played out in the gospel.

The Lord rebuffed the temptations of the adversary. He did not compromise his filial attitude toward God. He stayed faithful to his messianic mission. The second reading brings out the message - choose to suffer as Christ did rather than fall into sin. "Beloved: Christ suffered for sins once, the righteous for the sake of the unrighteous, that he might lead you to God" (1 Peter 3:18). The devil proposed the easy way, the bad and short cut to the cross. But the Lord took the way of the cross, which is the way for our salvation. In sum, God's ways are love and truth to those who keep his covenant (Psalm 25:10).