

FIRST SUNDAY of LENT - YEAR C - (21st February, 2010)

(Deuteronomy 26.4-10: Romans 10.8-13: Luke 4.1-13)

In a certain African country a young woman went to see a missionary priest. Her boyfriend belonged to another Christian Church. He told her that if they were to marry she would have to give up the practice of her Catholic faith which was of great importance to her. Besides she came from a poor background whilst he was very rich. The priest asked her: 'If your boyfriend loves you so much would he demand that you abandon your faith which you say is very precious to you. Would he give up his faith to become a Catholic?' The priest never saw her again so never knew how she responded to the temptation to give up her faith in order to marry her boyfriend.

Lent which we began last Wednesday is not so much about denying oneself as acknowledging God. In the First Reading we heard that through the ceremony of offering the first fruits, the Israelites had recognised all that God had done for them in the past, especially in the Exodus. The author of the book of Deuteronomy exhorts the people to 'remember' and 'not to forget the events of their history'. Even when they forgot God and strayed from him by idolatry God was always their faithful God as he is ours.

During Lent the Church invites us to embark on a journey, the journey of Lent, which is a journey towards Easter. We are a baptised people but haven't yet lived fully the life of a Christian. Lent calls us to a change of heart and a fuller living of the gospel. In today's gospel we see Jesus struggling against temptation. He will help us in our own struggles with temptation.

All the three readings are about the faithfulness of God. All of us are weak and prone to evil. This may be a disturbing truth, but it is one which we ignore at our peril. One of the great problems of our times is our failure to know ourselves, to recognise evil and deal with it within ourselves. We are born with conflicting desires so that doing good is always possible but never easy. The hardest victory of all is over oneself.

Shortly before his temptations Jesus had been baptised in the river Jordan by John the Baptist. There he had shown his solidarity with us sinners. Now he is showing again his solidarity with us humans as he allows himself to be tempted.

In the gospel we are told Jesus was a long time in the wilderness. We can divide the temptations into 3 areas. The first one is to put his trust in material things. Here for example it is to change stones into bread as Jesus is hungry. The word 'bread' can mean material things in general. In our world today riches, wealth, possessions can be great temptations.

The second temptation is to power which he is told will be his if he worships the devil. Jesus is tempted to act as a political messiah. If Jesus had all the power and glory look how important he would become and what good he would do.

In a certain country the president said many times that power was marvelous as everyone gave him so much respect and honour. Sadly we know from history how many leaders when elected had good motives but along the way were corrupted by power. Most of us have power of some kind, as parents over our children, as teachers, judges, bishops and priests etc. Do I use the power given to me to serve those entrusted to me? Jesus dismisses the devil by saying 'You must worship the Lord God and serve him alone'.

The third temptation is to popularity. It is a call to do something spectacular. If Jesus would just throw himself down from the top of the Temple, over 400 metres high, people would be amazed. What popularity he would have and he could do so much good. Yet he did work many miracles and look at what happened in the end. Popularity does not last long.

Ultimately the devil is trying to make Jesus forget who he is as a human being fully like us, and all the limitations involved, totally dependent on his Father to care for him. He is tempted to act from a power stance and not from the will of God. The devil tries to tempt Jesus to cheat on his humanity and satisfy his hunger and to use his power to deny his Incarnation, that he really is human and will not call on his power as God when the going gets tough. He wants to be in total

solidarity with us, allowing himself to be tempted just as we are and struggling to overcome the temptation. This was especially so in the Garden of Gethsemene when tempted not to go through with his Passion and death since he foresaw the terrible suffering and rejection it would involve.

The example of the gospel is clear: In his life Jesus proclaimed the primacy of God and his kingdom. We cannot use our gifts and talents for our own personal prestige or to dominate others politically, materially or spiritually. The attitude of Jesus must be ours and that of the Church. Its message and its power are not to serve itself but to serve God and his chosen ones, especially the poor and the marginalised.

In a remarkable phrase in today's gospel we read that having failed to tempt Jesus, the devil left him to return later. So the temptations in the wilderness were not a once off trial for Jesus. Like us temptation was an ongoing reality in his life. So he can understand us when we are tempted and what it means to struggle. It is important to note that Jesus as a human being, like us in everything. He did not overcome temptation because he was God but because he prayed and reflected on scripture.

One of the invitations during Lent is to spend more quiet time in prayer and to become more familiar with the bible. It was this deep reflection on scripture that gave Jesus the strength in the wilderness. Let us pray often to Jesus when tempted to overcome the temptation.

“Lord Jesus, it is never easy to overcome temptation. Help us not to rely on ourselves but to pray often for the gift of the Holy Spirit to be with us. Amen”

(Fr. Jim Kirstein, SMA. 16th February, 2010)