

First Sunday of Lent, A – March 5, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, AL – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 1,000 words

On this First Sunday of Lent we always hear of Christ’s temptation in the desert or wilderness. The Lord prepares for his public ministry by going on a sort of retreat of 40 days during which he fasts and prays – and is also tempted by the devil three times. In fact, it says that he went into the wilderness precisely to be tempted by the devil, and we might wonder why. Did Christ have to prove himself to his Father or to anyone else? Of course not. Did he have to prove that he was strong enough in his human nature? No; his human will was always perfectly united with the divine will. The only reasonable explanation that we can find for Christ’s temptation is that he did so to teach us a lesson: everything he did was for our instruction.

We could say that temptation is a necessary thing, resulting from our condition of being free.<sup>1</sup> If we did not have choices – including bad ones – we would not grow in our freedom. We become more free, the more we choose what is good. And this means that our will is gradually strengthened and perfected so that we can more readily identify and choose what is good. The strength of will that enables us to choose what is good easily – even when presented with an attractive temptation to what is morally evil – is called “virtue”. Growth in the virtues is part of our growth into Christian manhood, into maturity in Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Christ shows us in this gospel that temptation tends to strike during our weak moments.<sup>3</sup> He had fasted for forty days and it says that he was hungry. It is then that the devil shows up and tempts him to use his divine power to take care of his human need. But the Lord resists this temptation and so teaches us to avoid looking for easy solutions to our problems. He wants to identify with us fully in our human condition – and just think of all the starving people who must remain in that state and who cannot work a miracle to feed themselves whenever they want! Life is difficult, and sometimes our suffering is prolonged. Although we may not often find ourselves in a position of being starving, yet we do sometimes look for easy solutions to other problems. The devil uses these promises of quick fixes to try to get us off the path to God.

The second temptation is to presumption – to do something rash such as throwing himself down off a lofty height, with the presumption that God and the angels would take care of him. In the book of Sirach we read that “those who love danger will perish by it”;<sup>4</sup> to presume upon God in any way – also called “putting God to the test” – is to play with fire. Presumption sometimes masquerades as trust, and that is surely how the devil tried to present this temptation to Christ. But true trust is both prudent and also relational: I know that if I prudently do what God commands – namely, what is good and wise – then he will take care of my needs. The presumption that the devil sets before Christ is to do something imprudent and then to expect God to come to the rescue anyhow. Sometimes we might be tempted to commit a sin with the idea that we can just go confess it later, or that God will look the other way. Jesus puts the lie to such temptations of presumption – and is victorious over them, also.

In the final temptation, the devil offers Christ all the power and splendor that this world has. Who, in a moment of fantasy, has not wanted to be king or queen of the world? What the devil appeals to here, however, is vanity. Look down through the annals of history at what happened to those who became drunk with power, and the great disasters they left in their wake.

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<sup>1</sup> See Msgr. Pope’s “primer” on temptation at: <http://blog.adw.org/2015/03/primer-on-temptation/>.

<sup>2</sup> See Ephesians 4:13.

<sup>3</sup> I drew much inspiration for this homily, including some of the scriptural references, from the entry for the First Sunday of Lent in Francis Fernandez, *In Conversation with God*, volume 2, Scepter Publishers, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Sirach 3:26.

Look, in contrast, at those who were called to high power but exercised it in the fear of God and in humility; some of them are even now king- or queen-saints, remembered at the altar. We might be content to settle for being king of the roost instead of king of the world; but either way, we would be settling for vanity and pride. “Pride goeth before the fall”: pride is at the root of all our sins. The devil knows that pride and vanity are particularly weak spots for us, and so he sometimes strikes there. But Christ has the victory over those sorts of temptations as well.

Our Lenten sacrifices and good works are meant to help us grow stronger in the face of temptation. Even though denying ourselves food or other licit things makes us hungry or yearn for them – and so weak in a certain sense – it also strengthens our will. Good habits are formed by repetition, and thus we have 40 days to do works of charity and so get better at making charity a way of life. Then there is also prayer, which we must do more of during Lent as well. Jesus told the disciples during his agony in the garden, “Watch and pray, that you may not enter into temptation”.<sup>5</sup> If we struggle with temptation, we need to pray more. We need to pray more, so that we struggle less with temptation! The key word is “struggle”: we are in a spiritual battle. Temptation will always be there, but the struggle will get easier as we grow in virtue.

Therefore, we pray this Sunday that we may have a proper focus for our Lenten discipline. It may sound cliché, but we are truly in the desert with our Lord. He shows us the way, and we seek to follow. And his way goes by the cross, to be sure, but not only: ultimately, he leads us to resurrection and new life, which we look forward to at Easter.

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 26:41.