

First Sunday of Lent, C – March 10, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 950 words

Almost everyone – beyond the Blessed Mother, St. Joseph, and a few others – did not know who Jesus Christ was at first. This is evident throughout the gospels, when they express marvel at his mighty works after he begins his public ministry. “Where did this man get all this?... Is this not the carpenter’s son?”,¹ they wondered. Jesus had lived a normal life for his first 30 years. Yes, his conception and birth had been surrounded by signs and wonders. But then things got really normal, really fast. Think of the flight into Egypt – there was no special divine intervention to protect Jesus from harm; no, Joseph had to move his whole family to escape a threat. And it continues from there: all told, a rather ordinary life for 30 years.

But did the devil know who Jesus was? This Sunday’s gospel suggests that he did not.² Satan had surely taken special notice of Christ’s birth, also – but then he, too, observed the Holy Family’s ordinary life. They fulfilled the Jewish laws and went to the Temple, Joseph taught Jesus a trade, and so forth. We can easily imagine that the devil second-guessed what he had earlier observed about Jesus. But then, when Christ was about 30, John the Baptist would suddenly announce: “Behold, the Lamb of God”. Jesus then submitted to John’s baptism – and the voice from heaven declared, “You are my beloved Son”. Could it be, after all? Is he really the Christ? So the devil must have thought – and so the people of the region certainly wondered.

Christ thus embarks upon his 40 day “retreat” to the wilderness, to prepare for his mission that led to its culmination on the Cross. As God, he knew from the beginning where things were headed. He would have to reveal who he was not only to the world but also to the powers of darkness, over whom he would ultimately be victorious. The ancient Christian writer, Origen, opined that the devil would have first tempted Christ “from afar”, as it were – with “sleep, apathy, cowardice, and other such sins”. But then, after observing that Christ was hungry, he drew near and began to attack him openly. So he starts with the temptation that led to the fall of the First Adam: gluttony. It is his first attempt to verify if Jesus is really the Christ or not.³

After going for the belly, the devil targets the ego; here, too, he effectively repeats his temptation of Adam and Eve – recall how he had told them that they would be “like gods” if they ate the forbidden fruit. The devil is a fraud: trickery and deceit are some of his most-used tools. So he shows Christ “all the kingdoms of the earth”. Now scripture teaches that the devil is “prince of this world”:⁴ therefore, we conclude that he showed Christ his – the devil’s – kingdom. There is much pomp, splendor, and glamor in that kingdom; and giving oneself over to it can yield great temporal power. But idolatry is the prerequisite for gaining these so-called benefits – putting oneself, some other created thing, or Satan before God. Adam and Eve did; Jesus did not.

It would seem that after this second temptation the devil must have been starting to reach his conclusion about Jesus. So he offers a final test, one that would require an extraordinary manifestation of divine power: “If you are the Son of God”, he said, “throw yourself down from here...”, claiming that the angels would come to his aid. But concealed within this temptation is mockery, also, for if Christ were really the Messiah, he would have no need of angels to help him: he is far greater than the angels! The devil tempts Christ to presume on God’s goodness, to put

¹ Mark 6:2-3.

² My thanks to Fr. David Paternostro, S.J., for making this observation in connection with the writings of Origen that are cited below.

³ These paragraphs citing Origen and commenting on the three temptations in today’s gospel are based on various of Origen’s writings on the gospel of Luke, excerpted in *Ancient Christian Commentary*, volume III, 2003: InterVarsity Press, pages 73-76.

⁴ John 12:31.

God to the test – and he also insults Jesus in the process, trying to get him to vindicate his status as Son of God. But Christ confounds the devil in this temptation also.

Not long after this scene – in fact, at the end of this same chapter of Luke’s gospel – the devil will have figured everything out and, as it were, declared war openly. For when the Lord performed an exorcism on a man with an unclean spirit, the spirit cried out, “I know who you are – the Holy One of God!”⁵ And Christ commanded the demon to be silent: he wanted people to learn about him from his words and deeds – not from the devil and his demons. That is his will for us, as well. When we are tempted it can be so easy for us to focus on the evil one and to become disturbed about the troubles he might be giving us. But Jesus wants us to focus on him and his strength. We must never dialogue with the devil. Only Christ can do that.

The evil one is a cunning tempter, far more intelligent than we – and he carefully observes us throughout our time on earth. As a keen observer, he has learned a lot about us; thus he often knows when to strike and the easiest way to bring us down. But Christ is always stronger and alone can offer us the grace we need to resist any and all temptations. This time of Lent is for strengthening our focus on the Lord Jesus and learning to depend upon him more fully. We already know the answer to the question about whether he is the Messiah; what we are still learning, though, is how we may more fully give ourselves over to his care and protection. We pray, in the words of today’s psalm: “Be with me, Lord, when I am in trouble”!

⁵ Luke 4:34.