

First Sunday of Lent, Cycle B,
February 26, 2012

Genesis 9:8-15
1 Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1:12-15

Today's gospel, Mark's version of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is very brief, only four verses. We are more familiar, probably more comfortable, with the versions of Matthew and Luke. In each of these the devil challenges Jesus three times, "if you are the Son of God," and follows it with by demanding some act which would justify the title "Son of God." But rather than accede to the devil's terms, Jesus demonstrates Himself "Son of God" through His obedience to the Father. It is a shocking matter that Jesus, who is God Himself, allows Himself to be tempted by the devil. But this simply validates the reality of the incarnation: Jesus truly has become like one of us, totally human. As the author of Hebrews puts it, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin."

Our own temptations we encounter in the course of everyday life, not by encountering Satan in the wilderness, and there is reason to believe that this is the way it was for Jesus, too. An article written by Raymond Brown quite a number of years ago suggested that the temptations described by Matthew and Luke were in fact anticipations of things Jesus encountered during His public ministry.

For example, we might think of the time when, right after Peter had declared Jesus to be the Messiah, Jesus began telling them that He was to suffer and die. We know that the suffering He foretells was a difficult prospect for Him to face, and Peter was playing to these sentiments when he tried to persuade Him that this could never happen. "We have just recognized that you are the Messiah. You've got it made. Forget this suffering and dying business." Jesus would gladly have done so, but He knew this was not the way His Heavenly Father had mapped it out. When Jesus turned and rebuked Peter, rather sharply, for thinking like men rather than God, it was in words almost identical to those He used to the devil in the wilderness, "Begone, Satan."

In both Matthew's and Luke's version, the devil's first attempt was "If you are the Son of

God, command these stones to be turned into the loaves of bread." What would be the point of that? Apparently the devil was trying to lead Him to use miraculous powers to satisfy a purely ordinary need, or, more likely, to use such powers to demonstrate that He had them, whereas Jesus used them only to alleviate the needs of others. In John's version of the miracle of the loaves, when the people "saw the sign he had done, they said, 'This is truly the Prophet, the one who is to come into the world'," and Jesus had to flee into the mountain because He "knew that they were going to come and carry him off to make him king." The next day, when the same crowd comes looking for Him, He tells them that they look for him only because they have eaten and been filled, that they should be looking for food that lasts forever, that He will give them. They understand that He is making a claim for himself and they challenge Him by asking for a sign, referring specifically to the manna that Moses gave in the desert. Now in Jewish tradition there was a belief that in the days of the Messiah the manna would again descend from heaven. Clearly there is the suggestion here that if Jesus "turned these loaves into bread," in effect, acceding to the devil's suggestion, He would be accepted as the Messiah-king-prophet without further ado--so, in effect, the same temptation that Peter had presented to Jesus.

We don't normally think of the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane as a temptation, but in the synoptics we see Jesus struggling to accept His Father's will. Jesus knew what lay before Him; crucifixions were not rare in that time and culture. He knew it involved a slow, agonizing death and His human nature revolted against it. When He came into the Garden He began to feel sorrow and distress; He says, "My soul is sorrowful even unto death." He had to struggle to accept His Father's will. Listen to His words, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you; let this chalice pass me by." The intimate term "Abba," we know, is equivalent to "Daddy," and He appeals to the one for whom all things are possible. Couldn't Abba find some other way? Luke tells us that "He was in such agony and he prayed so fervently that his sweat became like drops of blood falling to the ground." Yet the final words of His prayer were, "Father, if it is not possible that this cup pass without my drinking it, your will be done."

I never saw the movie "The Last Temptation of Christ" nor read the novel on which it is based, but I understand that in the movie Satan, disguised as Jesus' guardian angel, persuades Him that God does not want Him to die, that he should come down from the cross, marry Mary Magdalene, and end his days in a normal human existence, all of which happens in a dream

sequence until the deception is uncovered. This is very unscriptural, of course, but one doesn't have to depart from the gospels to dream up a last temptation true to their scenario. As Jesus hangs on the cross He is taunted by the bystanders: "save yourself, if you are the Son of God, come down from the cross!" Likewise the chief priests with the scribes, whom He had often bested in debate, mocked him "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusted in God; let him deliver him now if he wants him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" When the devil tempted Him in the wilderness, he had taken Him to the holy city, and made him stand on the parapet of the temple, and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you and 'with their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone.'" This, I suppose, was to publicly manifest a proof of God's approval of Him. For Jesus to come down from the cross in the face of His taunters would have been such a demonstration and He would have fallen to Satan's plan.

There is a passage in Hebrews that never ceases to intrigue me: "In the days when he was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him." The "loud cries and tears" have to refer to the prayer in Gethsemane. So what does it mean that he was "heard" by "the one who was able to save him from death"? God did hear Him, but it was through death that he "became the source of eternal salvation for all."

Thanks to His fidelity we have the covenant of peace of the first reading: "When the bow appears in the clouds, I will recall the covenant I have made between me and you, so that the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all mortal beings." And a better vindication for Him: "At God's right hand, with angelic powers subject to him."

Lent is a time for spiritual renewal. Let us begin our renewal by resolving to be faithful in our temptations as Jesus was in his.

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