

1st Sunday of Lent--Cycle B, 2013
(Deut 26:4-10; Rom 10:8-13; Luke 4:1-13)

Last Sunday our opening hymn was "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty," one of my favorites, as I mentioned on an earlier occasion. But the third line in this version had been changed: Instead of the more familiar "Though the darkness hide thee, though the eye of sinful man, thy glory may not see," it went, "though the eye made blind by sin thy glory may not see." I understand why the change was made, i.e., for the sake of inclusive language, to avoid using "man" in a way that seemed to stand for all of humankind. I'm all in favor of inclusive language: I've written articles to promote it and have incorporated it into biblical revisions and translations I have been responsible for--and have the scars to prove it. However, I don't think the new wording catches the intended meaning. Certainly our sinfulness impedes our ability to see God, but I think the point intended here is the gap between the human and divine: the vision of God would be beyond any human, even supposing one to be sinless. The whole scene is a contrast between the heavenly liturgy ("cherubim and seraphim falling down before thee") and us still on earth, not yet qualified to join the heavenly liturgy, to look upon God face to face.

Of course Our Lord Jesus Christ has wonderfully narrowed that gap. By the very fact of His incarnation, Jesus has made us sharers of His divinity. He is our brother; the process of our divinization has already begun. But we are not yet ready for the beatific vision. St. Paul contrasts "now," **when** we see indistinctly, "as in a mirror," with "then, when the perfect comes," **when** we shall see face to face. Elsewhere Paul says that that which is mortal must clothe itself with immortality. That is why we used to sing "the eye of sinful man your glory may not see."

So we have a step still to go. And we do not simply wait till "the perfect comes," because we have lot of our own perfecting to do. How that is to be done we see in today's gospel; Our Lord shows us how to react to temptation. Satan

throws three challenges at Him, three feats of power to prove the He is the Son of God. Two of his challenges begin, "IF you are the Son of God, do ..." We remember Israel, God's son being delivered from slavery, 40 years in the wilderness, tempted and constantly falling. Some of Jesus' temptations, after 40 days in the wilderness, resemble those that Israel succumbed to. In spite of the signs and wonders God had performed, they complained that in the desert they would die of famine, so God sent them "bread from heaven," the manna. Satan first tempted Jesus, "if you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." But Jesus knew what that manna was to teach Israel, "One does not live by bread alone." We can also see a parallel between Israel's worship of the golden calf, and Satan's next attempt, the promise to give Jesus power and glory if He would worship Satan. Jesus proved Himself to be the Son of God by His obedience to God, as Israel had not.

The temptations we meet with come in the course of everyday life, not by encountering Satan in the wilderness, and it can be supposed that this is the way it was for Jesus, too, that the presentation of confrontation in the desert may actually be a dramatized report of experiences of Jesus in His public ministry. An article written by Raymond Brown some years ago suggest 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. Forget this suffering and dying business." Jesus would gladly have done so, but He knew this was not the way His Heavenly Father had planned it. When Jesus rebuked Peter, rather sharply, for thinking like men rather than God, His words were 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 because He "knew they were going to come and carry him off to make him king." The next day, when the same crowd comes looking for a repeat of the miracle, He tells them that they should be looking for food that lasts forever, that He will give them. They challenge Him by asking for a sign, referring specifically to the manna that Moses gave in the desert. Jewish tradition believed that in the days of the Messiah the manna would again descend from heaven. They are suggesting here that if Jesus "turned these stones 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 offered.

Again, it is not Satan in person but the bystanders at the Crucifixion who taunt Him, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross!" "Let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusted in God; let God deliver him now For he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" In the third wilderness temptation Satan had 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.'" I suppose this was to be a public manifestation 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.

Like Jesus, who proved Himself to be the Son of God by His obedience, we must prove ourselves to be children of God by obedience. Our temptations normally come in our everyday affairs. If they came through a red-cloaked figure with horns and a tail, they would be easier to spot, but they come in subtler form. Temptations against purity are usually pretty apparent, though they can also be subtle and not easy to recognize. Satan will not offer us wealth and power if we will adore him, but it's easy to make the pursuit of them into a form of idolatry. Just read the newspapers and you can find people doing all kinds of things for the sake of money and power and popularity. This is where Lent comes in. A time for special vigilance. There are all kinds of penances we can perform, but what God really wants is abstaining from sin and true repentance from whatever evil we have been guilty of. "Rend your hearts and not your vestment." Giving alms is highly recommended for those who have the means. But kindness and generosity cost us nothing and are even more acceptable. Everywhere we hear the call to a new evangelization. Perhaps we don't know how to respond; to open ourselves to all with a new effort to be kind and generous is a good start and will, in surprising manner open up other pathways to us.