

Commentary to the First Sunday of Lent (A)



Is it possible to fast forty days and live to tell the tale? The New York Times says the average person can go for thirty days without eating. Gandhi and the Irish prisoners in British jails in Belfast fasted even longer. Mitch Snyder, the US advocate for the homeless, fasted fifty-one days.

Like Jesus, these men took liquids.

Not only Matthew but also Mark and Luke write of the famous temptations. We have reams of raw material to work with.

The only eyewitness to these terrible temptations is Jesus Himself. But why did He tell His followers of them? He told us so little. We know about only one hundred days in His life. About the twelve thousand others, we know almost nothing. What was His purpose in telling us about His chat with Satan? How do we break the code? Tread lightly, for we deal with the autobiography of Christ. This Gospel is heady stuff.

The temptations mark the beginning of His professional life. He was anxious to get in shape and get the fat off His body and spirit. Before He would preach to us, He wanted to prove what He preached He practiced. He entered the forty day retreat. He would not take food. Prayer would provide nourishment. From this fast comes our forty days of Lent.

Dostoyevsky writes that the three Gospel temptations govern human history and underline the

contradictions in us. The temptation of the bread speaks of the desire of our bodies to be pampered. The gross term "pigging out" fits comfortably into our language. Each of us likes to be stroked. If others to our dismay will not do it for us, we eagerly volunteer.

The leap from the temple suggests we are anxious to forget our human condition. So, we want to take off and fly. Adults leave the ground with vodka. Their teen children will not be outdone. So, they wrap themselves around a six pack of beer. Kids in the ghettos use drugs to fly over tenement ugliness. Children sail away through daydreaming.

The temptation to call the world one's own speaks to our Orwellian Big Brother. We want to dominate those who are weaker. We can pick the weak off miles away. How else does one explain husband baiting, wife beating, and child abuse? (Domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women in the US.) And the biggest power of them all is abortion, capital punishment, and war.

Every mother's child of us has the seeds of these temptations within us. We eat too much, drink too much, and spend too much on ourselves. We want everything even though we have no place to put it. Conversely we give away so little of our money or leisure. We fast seldom. Do I have to tell you we infrequently pray?

Is it surprising that God does not understand us? He has given us so much. Today we open the book on a fresh Lent. For some, it will be our last. Jesus issues everyone a license to hunt. The quarry is our honorable or perhaps dishonorable selves. Remember Plato's great line: the greatest victory in the world is that of self-conquest. That line was written 400 years before Christ. It remains true today.

This then is the ultimate reason why the usually taciturn Nazarene told us of His own temptations. The final score was Christ 3 and Satan 0. Jesus is saying, "As I, so you."

Each one of us should have a Lenten program. Here are some hints. Call someone who's lonely and say, "I'll be over tomorrow to take you to lunch or take you for a walk or run errands." Go to Confession. Smile more. Read the Gospels. Forgive an enemy. Love someone who doesn't deserve it. Quit smoking. Stop drinking. Lose weight. Be kinder than is necessary. Exercise. Live one day at a time; make it a work of art. (Unknown)

A pilgrim asked Mother Teresa, "What's wrong with the Church?" She replied, "You and I, for we are the Church."

Reflect this Lent that there is no neutral ground in the universe. Every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan. While Satan is out of style, he is not out of business. (CS Lewis)

Father James Gilhooley