

Lent 1-C

Temptations of Christ

Vancouver Convention Centre

16 February 2013

Dear Bishop-elect Jensen, brothers in the priesthood, consecrated men and women, our seminarians from the Abbey, and dear friends in Christ of the Archdiocese of Vancouver:

Introduction

It is a real joy for us to be gathered here this late afternoon to celebrate this Holy Mass at the outset of the Church's annual pilgrimage to the celebration of Easter. I thank all of you who organized and are participating in this second annual ONE Conference – a true manifestation of the vitality of our local Church. By coming together as the Catholics, we visibly demonstrate that we are the one Body of Christ, sharing the same apostolic faith and empowered for the common mission of living and sharing the Good News of Jesus.

This past Wednesday, we began Lent by being marked with ashes on our forehead, a sign of our transience in this world and a sign of our pledge to be more fervent in prayer, self-denial and acts of charity.

Gospel

In today's Gospel we have the well known description of the "temptations of Jesus," as recorded by the evangelist Luke. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that this Gospel records the "testing" of Jesus. In

any case, we heard that Jesus, after being baptized in the River Jordan, immediately withdrew for forty days into the desert of Judea. In the Bible, the desert is an eloquent metaphor of our human condition. It was often the place of trial, as it was for the People of Israel and for Jesus, and is for us today in the many deserts in which we find ourselves.

These temptations are at the outset of Jesus' public life. He was anxious to get in shape for the gruelling ministry he was about to undertake. Before beginning his preaching to us, he wanted to show us that he practised what he preached. He who never sinned and could not sin, nonetheless submitted to being tested so that he could sympathize with our weaknesses (cf. Heb 4:15).

Being put to the test was part of the Son of God's descent into the fullness of our humanity. He penetrated our humanity "down to its uttermost depths, in order to find the 'lost sheep,' to bear it on his shoulders, and to bring it home."¹

Jesus went into the wilderness and he struggled. His ministry begins with testing, exposure to the risks and perils of every human existence. His temptations are also an echo of the ancient deception whereby Satan provoked our first parents. They were tested and they failed. But Christ proved victorious over the triple deceit of the prince

¹ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 26.

of evil. As the New Adam, he overcame them, decisively rejecting the tempter. The temptations the devil placed before Jesus were nothing other than delusions about radical independence from God, that independence which the first Adam wanted and was willing to disobey to claim.

In the course of our lives, each of us in his or her own way, is led into the desert by the Spirit, where we are put to the test – and put to the test because we are free beings: “to live life to the full in freedom we must overcome the test that this freedom entails, that is, temptation.”² Only if we are freed from the slavery of falsehood and sin can we find “life in abundance” (cf. Jn 10:10) and attain joy. While it is part of being human to struggle with temptation, we now can *never* say that God does not understand these trials of ours, and we can *never* say that they cannot be overcome. Because Jesus overcame his trials, he enables us, with the power of his grace at work in us from Baptism onwards, likewise to conquer them.

In his discussion of Jesus’ temptations, Pope Benedict, in his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, has written:

² Benedict XVI, Angelus (6 March 2006).

At the heart of all temptations, as we see here, is the act of pushing God aside because we perceive him as secondary, if not actually superfluous and annoying in comparison with all the apparently far more urgent matters that fill our lives.

Constructing a world by our own lights, without reference to God, building on our own foundation; refusing to acknowledge the reality of anything beyond the political and material, while setting God aside as an illusion – that is the temptation that threatens us in many varied forms.³

Let's now look at each of the tests that Jesus underwent in order to try to understand how we are tempted and how we are to overcome these temptations.

First Temptation: Appeal to Independence

Satan first tempts Jesus with food, since he has been fasting for forty-days. “Don't worry about it! You are God!,” he says. “You can have all the food you want. For example, turn this rock into bread!” (cf. Lk 4:3). This temptation is the one ever-present in the human heart: “Be self-sufficient. Rely only on yourself.”

You and I are tempted, too, with the demon of self-sufficiency. Sometimes with food, but that is relatively “small stuff.” Real

³ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 28.

temptations are far more subtle. But, at root, each of these temptations says: “Don’t bother God with this; he’s not interested. Take care of yourself. Watch out for number one, because if you don’t, no one else will.”

Second Temptation: Appeal to Power

In the second temptation, Satan says, paraphrasing: “Look out from the highest mountain and all will be given you. Think about how good that would feel. I control the honours in this world, and I can distribute them to anyone I want to. Come into allegiance with me! You are just doing what is good for your own self. Try it.”

But Jesus declines this invitation to acquire power by the idolatry of adoring the devil. He reserves worship for the Lord God alone.

We all struggle with the demon of the desire for power, for dominating others with the force of our own will, no matter cleverly it is masked. But The Kingdom of God is different from the kingdom of this world whose power Satan parades before Jesus. The true Kingdom grows through the weakness and humility of the Cross not by power and accumulation of honour and praise.

Pope Benedict has given us a stirring example of this humility in choosing not to cling to his awesome mission as the Successor of Peter with all its attendant trappings. Rather, he has willingly let go of his authority because he has discerned that he no longer has the physical and

spiritual strength required to carry out his responsibilities as Pope. In the Church, the use of power is only legitimate when it serves the good of others and never as a means of aggrandizing the one who exercises it. This goes for popes, bishops, priests, parents, teachers. Once power is thought of as a means of control, it becomes idolatry.

Third Temptation: Appeal to Pride

In Jesus' third temptation, the tempter takes him to the temple in Jerusalem. He appeals to Jesus' pride, once again saying "If you are the Son of God" (Lk 4:9), then you will have no problems with physical dangers. Jump off this temple roof and prove your identity to everyone. Scriptures say that angels will rush down from heaven to catch you. Come on, show us what you've got! Show us your stuff; muster your magic. Leap from the temple in full self-assurance."

But Jesus does not yield to the temptation to submit God, his loving Father, to experiment. God is not to be "tested" the way new products are tested for consumers. This is the arrogance of those who would themselves want to determine what is merciful, loving and just. How often we see this in ourselves and all around us. In our pride, we think that we can determine what marriage is, what human sexuality is about, what justice is, when humans can live and die.

We too struggle with this demon, imagining ourselves to be better informed, perhaps even kinder or more understanding than God himself!

True humility, the opposite of pride, begins with recognizing that God's goodness, that his world, which he created with such love, cannot be put to the test: a mystery, yes; sometimes incomprehensible, yes; but even more so, always loving and always divine.

Conclusion

The question before us when we read about the various temptations of Jesus is simply this: How do these same temptations play out in our own life? Lent is "the acceptable time" (2 Cor 6:2) to confront them. It is the time to unscramble our false values and simply reassert the absolute primacy of God's love and mercy in our lives. Since God is the most wonderful and loving being anywhere, how can we block him out with lesser, and ultimately unfulfilling attachments, such as the desire to be independent of him, to seek fulfillment in power or to treat him as one whose goodness we can judge?

Amidst the many "things" we "do" for Lent, let one rise in importance above all others. Re-balance your priorities. The Lord's resolute attitude before his temptations is an invitation for us to follow him with clarity of vision and courageous determination. We ask that Mary, Our Lady of Fatima, whose statue is before us, to accompany on our journey so that, at the end of this Lent, we may contemplate the Risen Lord, interiorly renewed and ready to meet him when he comes in glory.

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