

1st Sunday in Lent, Cycle B March 1, 2009

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

Lead Us Not into Temptation

About a month and a half ago, we celebrated the feast of the Baptism of the Lord. The gospel reading that day was from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 1, verses 7-11. And we heard that: *“On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.’”* Fast forward now from the end of Christmas season to today’s gospel reading which starts right where that gospel reading left off, with verses 12-15. It begins: *“At once the Spirit drove him out into the desert.”* So Jesus is baptized and then immediately the Holy Spirit sends him into the desert to be tempted. This is Jesus who taught us how to pray to His Father saying: *“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”*

And as often and as ardently as we pray the Our Father, we often feel overwhelmed with temptations. Unfortunately, unlike Jesus, we often fail and succumb to those temptations. And while we fail frequently, our commitment to our baptismal commitments must not fail. We must stay committed to improving, to growing in virtue, so that we can better resist temptation the next time. And that is one of the reasons we fast during Lent; to strengthen ourselves and help learn how to resist temptations.

The Spirit doesn’t tempt us, but does the Spirit sometimes allow us to be tempted? I would like to read a portion of reflection on this idea written by St. Alphonsus that I came upon: *“Yet the Lord sometimes permits that souls, which are dear to Him, should be tempted with some violence, in order that they may better understand their own weakness, and the necessity of grace to prevent them from falling [...]; God permits us to be tempted, that we may be more detached from the things of earth, and conceive a more ardent desire to behold Him in heaven [...]; God also permits us to be tempted, in order to increase our merits [...] When it is disturbed by temptation, and sees itself in danger of committing sin, the soul has recourse to the Lord and to His divine Mother; it renews its determination to die rather than offend God; it humbles itself and takes refuge in the arms of divine mercy. By this means, as is proved by experience, it acquires more strength and is united more closely to God.”* (St. Alphonsus Mary de Liguori, *The Love of our Lord Jesus Christ Reduced to Practice*, chapter 17)

Reflect on those times when you have been most severely tempted and maybe have not been up to the challenge. Hopefully you repented of your transgressions and renewed your commitment to try harder not to fail again. Hopefully those occasions made you more aware and appreciative of God’s Divine Mercy. Hopefully you came away from the experience as a stronger person. Hopefully your cleansing experience was in the words of St. Peter in our second reading: *“An appeal to God for a clear conscience.”*

Often we are tempted the greatest at a time when we become judgmental and critical of others. When we look for the faults of others, it’s almost as if God sends a little test to remind us of our own weaknesses; a reminder that we are only able to persevere with God’s grace to help us. It is at times like this that we want to fall to our knees in humility

and once again ask for God's mercy. It is these times, when we know that we would not stand up to judgment ourselves, that we learn not to judge others, but instead pray for the grace of conversion for them and for ourselves.

Can anyone say that they would be a better person today, if they had never been tempted in the past? How would you know? Temptations make us stronger, and lead us to know ourselves better. Would you want to hear a homily from a deacon or priest who claimed that he had never been tempted? His words would seem pretty hollow. And what if that deacon or priest claimed never to have succumbed to temptations? First of all, he would be a liar; and second, he would never be able to comprehend and teach about the wonderful gifts of God's forgiveness and mercy.

We are all tempted and we have all sinned. Sinning is not something to be proud of, but we should not get caught up in despair wallowing in the mud and dirt. We need to get back up and clean ourselves with the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Our past temptations and sins are something we can learn from, and this can result in us growing closer to God. Our past is part of who we are; and we are loved by God.

The Spirit drove Jesus into the desert. Where is He driving you? He's trying to drive you to a closer relationship with Jesus, even if you don't understand how.

Deacon Joe Hulway