

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

The three temptations, or the three “Ps” and the three antidotes

Once again, we have begun our journey of Lent together; that special time when we try to deepen our relationship with the Lord and to grow in our faith. Lent is indeed a journey and, like all journeys, it needs several things so that we can journey well. Any journey needs a destination and this, of course, is Easter, when we will once again celebrate Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection. We also need directions and pointers to help us along the way as we journey, for example, our Scripture readings, or devotions (such as the Stations of the Cross). A good journey also needs at least one other thing. I am not sure how you pack for travel and what essentials you always take with you, but most of us certainly make sure that we have things with us that we will need and that will make the journey easier and safer. This is also true with our journey of Lent. By ancient tradition there are three key things that we need to “pack” and to make use of during Lent: *prayer, acts of charity/almsgiving and fasting*.

In fact, the number 3 is very much part of our readings for this first weekend of Lent. Jesus faces three temptations in the desert. Have you ever wondered why there are three temptations and not say, four or five or ten? Many spiritual writers have noticed something startling and fascinating: the three temptations of Jesus correspond to the three temptations that faced Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (as outlined in our First Reading, Genesis 2: 7-9; 3: 1-7). What is more, Jesus in facing these three temptations and obeying the Father’s will, undoes the disobedience of Adam and Eve who gave in to the temptations and said “yes” to Satan. As St. John Cassian wrote many centuries ago: “Jesus had to be tempted himself by the same passions by which Adam also was tempted...by these three vices then, we read, the Lord, the Savior, was also tempted.” The three temptations also have another important connection. Not only are they the three temptations that Adam and Eve gave assent to and our Lord refused, but they encapsulate the three basic or root temptations that humans have faced and continue face, each and every day! What are these temptations? They are pleasure, possessions and pride: the three deadly “Ps”!

In his book, *An Introduction to the Spiritual Life*, Brant Pitre explores these three fundamental temptations. First, he notes, Adam and Eve were tempted by *pleasure*. They were told by Satan that the fruit of the tree was good for food and then Jesus was hungry after fasting for forty days and nights. Secondly, we are told that the fruit of the tree in the Garden was a delight to the eyes: something then to be grabbed or *possessed*. Our Lord too was tempted, as Satan offers him possession of all the kingdoms of the earth. Finally, Adam and Eve are told by Satan that the fruit of the tree will make them wise, even like gods. He appeals to their *pride*. Likewise, Satan tempts Jesus to throw himself off the Temple parapet to make a show of who Jesus is and therefore to perform a miracle, just to make a spectacle.

We should remember all these three “Ps” are, in many ways, good in themselves. Pleasure, such as food is not bad, nor are possessions if they help us or others. Having the right sort of “pride”

perhaps in family or friends, is not bad either, nor is wanting to be wise. No, the problem, the issue, common to all these temptations is that acquiring them is done by disobeying God, or by these “goods” becoming distorted. In other words, these good things become disordered and even become a vice rather than a virtue, and so are bad for us, rather than good.

Pleasure, when disordered or out of control can quickly degenerate into addictions, pornography, or human trafficking or exploitation. The root of the vice here is a disordered desire or need for pleasure, that leads to the use of people as objects. The desire for possessions, when disordered and out of control, degenerates into robbery, stealing, corruption, polluting the environment or slavery. It becomes an obsessive desire and craving for possessions, and usually leads to avarice, greed and envy. Then there is a pride. When this is disordered and out of control, we end up with terrible suffering due to arrogance and the lust for power by those in positions of authority. Here we see the obsessive desire and craving for status and for bolstering the ego carried out whatever the cost.

As we noted and sadly, Adam and Eve succumb and the rest, as they say, is history. However, Jesus, often called “the Second Adam” (see Romans 5: 12-19, our Second Reading at Mass today) says “no” and his love and obedience undoes the disobedience of Adam and Eve. His ultimate obedience and love will, of course, be seen on Holy Thursday and Good Friday, and his ultimate victory we will celebrate at Easter. What is more, Jesus, having experienced these foundational temptations, does understand and know how we struggle. As C.S. Lewis wrote so insightfully: “Christ, because he was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means.”

There is yet more. Not only does Jesus undo the disobedience of Adam and Eve, he offers us three remedies, or antidotes, to these ancient and primeval temptations. In fact, we heard of these three remedies just a few days ago, on Ash Wednesday, in the Gospel taken from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-18). These antidotes or remedies form the backbone of our Lenten practices and journey together. They are: fasting, almsgiving (or acts of charity) and prayer. In *fasting*, we control our desire for pleasure and so avoid slipping into greed or over indulgence. In almsgiving, we control our desire for possessions and avoid selfishness, or an indifference to others, especially those in need. In *prayer*, we control our pride and our desire for power and control; for in prayer, we realize our absolute need for God and for his love, grace and mercy.

With all this in mind, may we journey well through this holy and life-giving season of Lent!

Very Rev Msgr. Anthony M. Barratt, STL, PhD, ChM