

First Sunday in Lent
March 10, 2019
Homily for the Anglican Usage Mass
of the
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Luke 4:1-13

Our Old Testament lesson describes the ritual self-deprivation that the people of Israel were to undertake when they came into the Promised Land. This ceremony became the Feast of Booths, otherwise known as the Harvest Festival, when Jews made a pilgrimage to the Temple at the end of the harvest and gave the first fruits of their labor to the Lord. It is a model of how we should regard our fasting during Lent, for it shows that the basis for our sacrifice for God is the goodness of the Lord to us.

Moses tells the Israelites that they are to recount in a liturgical way the hardships they endured and how the Lord delivered them from the power of their enemies. After this official recounting of their deliverance, they were to set down before the Lord the first fruits of the harvest as a form of worship. This is to show their love for Him who delivered them, but we see also if we keep reading that this ritual self-deprivation is also to help provide for those whom God also loves. Thus, Deuteronomy 26 goes on to say that these first fruits will be used to feed the orphan and the widow, the sojourner and the priests who officiate at all sacrifices to the Lord.

Fasting for us, then should include these two components. We fast because we are grateful for the bounty that the Lord has set before us, so we intentionally deprive ourselves of the first fruits of our labor. And when we give this away, this wealth that we have not consumed, we intend that it go to support the Church and those whom the ministry of the Church sustains. Fasting is an act of gratitude that issues in generosity.

In our Gospel the devil seeks to distort the meaning of fasting and direct this devotional practice towards resentment. After St. Luke notes that Jesus was hungry after he had fasted for forty days, the devil appears and seeks immediately to remind Jesus of what He does not possess. The fast began as an expression of gratitude for all we've received, but the devil hopes that in our hunger we will think about what we don't yet have. He hopes that we will concentrate on the deprivation rather than the bounty.

The method here is especially devious because the entire exercise began out of our devotion to God. And once we experience hunger, the devil would have us believe that God is keeping from us this good thing of life. He even tells the lie that God still must prove His love for us. He says in essence, "Throw yourself off the temple and if God loves you, He will keep you from falling." For a fast which began precisely because we have seen how much God loves us, this is absurd. But we remember that Satan approaches us in our weakness.

We notice that Jesus did not fall for the devil's deception, but this does not mean that the time of trial is over. The Scriptures says that after Jesus successfully resisted the adversary's temptations, the devil departed, "until an opportune time." This indicates the devil's intention to return, to find Jesus in another weak state and then accost the Lord with similar lies. We know that the devil did indeed return and, for example, demanded that Jesus deliver to him St. Peter, which, of course, Jesus refused. The point is that successful resistance does not guarantee future trials will be excluded.

What we learn from this is that we must have a strategy to overcome those temptations when the devil presents them, especially as they are more likely to appear in our weakness. How do we resist the temptation to feel unloved, particularly when we are hungry and it feels like we are in want?

Jesus is God, so He was able to refute the devil's lies with direct retorts that shut down the devil's arguments. St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus and great spiritual director, teaches us that this method will not work for us mere mortals. The devil has been around a lot longer than we have, and he is much smarter than we are; and he will outwit us if we opt to engage him in conversation. Never are we to turn and address the devil directly, as if we could win an argument with the father of lies.

Instead, we must recall the same things that led us to undertake a fast in the first place. When we are in need of consolation, tempted to imagine God is withholding His love, we are to recall the blessings we have received and turn to Him in thanksgiving. We also should not hesitate to ask God for help, recalling that in Jesus' own hour of weakness angels came to minister to him. We must recall the words of Jesus, "Ask and you will receive." Aid will be forthcoming, if only we have the wherewithal to request it while being assaulted.

The other thing we can do is meditate upon the good our fasting is accomplishing. Yes, there is now more to use to provide for the poor, but we have also entered into the suffering of Jesus Himself, that suffering that accomplished the redemption of the world. To fast is to participate in the salvation of our neighbors, not just their sustenance, so we must remember with every fast that the souls of the lost are at stake. Our prayer must be that by our sacrifices these precious children of God may be found. There can be no greater incentive than to love those Jesus Himself loves, those He died to save.