

“It is through many tribulations and hardships that we must enter the Kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:22)

Interstate route 66 is arguably the most celebrated and iconic highway in the United States. Constructed at a considerable cost in 1926, the highway passes through no fewer than eight states. It begins in Chicago, Illinois and ends in Santa Monica, California. How famous is Route 66? A television series dating back the late fifties was named for the famous highway. In addition, a once popular song was a paean to America’s most traveled road, “I Find my Kicks on Route 66”. The American author John Steinbeck’s classic novel, “The Grapes of Wrath”, a story of dust bowl migrants who make their way to California, devotes one full chapter to the two lane highway.

If, in thirties and forties, you travelled on route 66 from Chicago to Santa Monica, you had to pass through one of America’s deserts, the Mojave Desert, where temperatures often soar to 120 degrees, in order to reach his final destination. It is a place of death. There is no water, the basic element of life, for the weary traveler. One could not take a detour. Emerging from the desert was a victory of sorts. The driver then continued on his way to the place where he can begin a new life: California.

In today’s gospel (Mt. 4: 1-12), the Spirit leads Jesus into the desert (Mt. 4:1). In the barren wilderness, Jesus enters into the history of his own people, the Jews, who wandered in desert for forty years, hoping to enter their ultimate destination, the Promised Land. For Jesus, He faces a time of testing. He encounters the “the Father of lies”, whose objective is to lead him astray, divert him from his mission and entice him to break faith with God. At the end of his earthly life Jesus will face the greatest test of all by the Master of deceit, namely, to come down from the cross.

As Christians, we are a people “on the way”. We are en route to our destination. As we make our way we must enter the desert. It is unavoidable. The Evil One wants us to forget who we truly are and to push God aside. Forgetting our vocation and destiny leaves us in a state of spiritual amnesia. Knowing our true identity and remembering is not an easy feat in our contemporary culture given the many unhealthy distractions we face on a daily basis. As St. Augustine writes, “Our pilgrimage on earth cannot be exempt from trial. No one knows himself except through trial, or receives a crown except after victory, or strives except against an enemy or temptations”.

In his reflections on Christ’s temptations in the desert, the American writer, John Shea recalls a movie from many years ago. Although he cannot remember the film’s title, he has a sharp memory of the plot. “A young man is leaving Greenwich village in NYC to make his fortune in Hollywood. As he is walking away from his two flat home, his mother opens the window and yells to him her parting advice. ‘Remember your grandmother snuck out of Russia in a hay wagon’. She is afraid that in the foreign territory of Hollywood he will forget who he is and give in to temptation. Perhaps the memory of his grandmother will keep him on the right path, the path to God.

The Spirit leads each one of us into the desert. And sometimes our faith may be shaken. What about the desert of illness and suffering, of loneliness and despair? In Sacred Scripture, the desert is a place of loneliness and isolation. But as we learn from Our Blessed Lord, it is a place of heroic trust in God.

There can be no detours in a Christian’s life. He must follow the path chosen for him or her by the Lord.

If we should ever leave our “route 66” we run the risk of losing the right way and discovering that we are indeed lost.