

1st Sunday of Lent, Cycle C
Deuteronomy 26: 4-10
Psalm 91:1-2, 10-11, 12-13, 14-15
Romans 10:8-13
Luke 4:1-13
Rev. Charles B. Gordon, C.S.C.
The Garaventa Center
The University of Portland

The devil must have been delighted to get Jesus out into that desert. Everything must have seemed to be going according to satanic plan. For the devil, everything is always about himself. His self-obsession caused his own fall from grace. His pride got him tossed from heaven. Famously, there is no “we” in hell. Everything there is “I” writ large. The devil’s greatest triumph happened when he convinced Adam and Eve to renounce their relationship with God, and exalt themselves. Now, the ultimate individualist is trying the same tactic on the Son of God.

The idea is to trick Our Lord into believing that he, Jesus, exists for his own sake, and out in the desert, all the conditions appear to favor the tempter. First and foremost, Jesus is alone. He is isolated from all the people he knows and loves. Under the circumstances, it would be natural for him to think of himself first. Second, he is suffering terrible hunger and thirst. His human nature has to be crying out for the food and drink he needs so badly in that moment. His body has to be telling him, “Right now the only thing that matters is what I need. Yes, by all means, turn some stones into bread!” The devil tries to extend that entirely natural focus on the self to other things that our human nature instinctively craves - power and glory: “Rule all the kingdoms of the earth. Be borne up by angels.”

Jesus successfully resists temptation by doing what Adam and Eve failed to do. He resolutely puts his relationship with his Heavenly Father before all else. He expresses his resolution in the words of Scripture: “It is written: You shall worship the Lord, your God and him alone shall you serve. You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.” And Jesus’ victory over the temptation to exult himself is manifested in the titles by which we know him: Son of God: relationship, Our Lord: relationship, Son of Man, Christ, Savior: relationship, relationship, relationship.

In our first reading today, Moses describes how the faithful should conduct themselves when they participate in the rites and sacrifices that would be central to temple worship. In words that sound remarkably like a description of what happens when members of the congregation bring up the gifts before the Eucharistic prayer at Mass, Moses decrees “The priest shall receive the basket from you and shall set it in front of the altar of the LORD your God.” It is moving to notice how little things have changed, in this respect, since the earliest days of the relationship between God and God’s people. For thousands of years, innumerable baskets of offerings have been handed to numberless priests by countless individuals to be placed before the altar of the same God, who knows and loves each an every one of them by name.

Of course, the people who present the bread and the wine and the basket to the priest are not acting simply on their own behalf. They represent all those who have gathered in worship and ultimately, the whole people of God. This is something else that has not changed, as is evident when we consider the rest of Moses’ instructions to the faithful. Those who are presenting the basket of offerings are to do so in the context of the history of God’s relationship with the entire people. He

tells them to say, “When the Egyptians maltreated and oppressed *us...we* cried to the LORD...and he brought *us* out of Egypt...and he gave *us* this land flowing with milk and honey. Therefore, I have now brought you the first fruits...of the soil which you, O LORD, have given me.” So, the presentation of that basket has always ultimately been not something that *I* do, but something that *we* do. And so it is with the life of faith, and so it is with Lent.

Lent is a season in which we resolve to give up for Christ’s sake, pleasures that we could otherwise easily enjoy, and perform acts of charity that we could otherwise easily avoid. So, in a sense, in Lent we dwell, for a while, in the desert. In that desert we will be tempted to gratify ourselves at the expense of resolutions we have made for love of Christ. In our own little way, we will be tempted as Jesus was, to make our desires and ourselves the center of our world. We’ll be tempted to choose ourselves over our relationship with God.

But if we read our Gospel closely, we learn that it was the Spirit, not the devil, who led Christ into the desert. It is the same Spirit who leads us into Lent. Lent is a teacher. It teaches us the futility of believing that we in our littleness and incompleteness can make it on our own. It teaches us that we are never really alone. We are sustained at every moment by a rich tapestry of relationships with one another and with God that embraces the person sitting next to you in the pew, and extends all the way back to Mount Sinai and beyond. It teaches us to reach past the temptation to be self-sufficient, to one another and to God. Focusing on ourselves is death; focusing on Christ-in-one another is the way, the truth, and life.