

## Fr. Jins' Homily for the First Sunday of Lent

Matthew 4:1-11

Lent is primarily the time of intense spiritual preparation for conquering our temptations, using the means Jesus used during his forty days of preparation in the desert for his public life. It is also the time for repenting of our sins and renewing our lives for the celebration of Easter with our Risen Lord who conquered sin and death by his suffering, death and Resurrection. Today's readings teach us that we are always tempted by the devil, by the world, and by our own selfish interests. So, we need to cooperate actively with God's grace to conquer our temptations and practice prayer, self-control, and charity.

Today's Gospel, teaches us how the "desert experience" of fasting, praying, and soul-strengthening was a kind of spiritual "training camp" for Jesus which enabled him to confront his temptations successfully, and then to preach the Good News of salvation. The Gospel also prescribes a dual action plan for Lent: (1) We should confront our temptations and conquer them as Jesus did, by fasting, prayer and the Word of God. (2) We should renew our lives by true repentance and live the Good News of God's love, mercy, and forgiveness.

The Holy Spirit led Jesus into the huge fifteen-by-thirty-five mile desert between the mountain of Jerusalem and the Dead Sea so that he could pray to the Father about the public ministry that he was about to commence. "Forty days" was a Hebrew expression meaning a considerable period of time, as seen in various incidents in Jewish history: a) the 40 days of rain in Noah's time which Noah spent in the ark in prayer; b) the 40 days which Moses spent on the mountain with God (Ex. 24:18); c) the 40 days the prophet Elijah traveled on the strength of the meal which the angel had given him (II Kg. 19).

The three temptations – turn stones into bread (4:3); jump off the Temple pinnacle (4:6); worship Satan (4:9) – demonstrate three kinds of control: material, spiritual and civil. They correspond to three wrong evaluations: 1) those who have material resources are blessed by God; 2) those who have spiritual powers are blessed by God; 3) those who have national power are blessed by God. These, in turn, correspond to three human-divine bargains: 1) I will worship You if you make me rich; 2) I will worship You if You endow me with magical powers; and 3) I will worship You if You give me political power. These temptations of Jesus are traditionally treated as archetypes of the temptations we experience: the temptation to satisfy personal needs by material possessions, the temptation to perform miraculous deeds by spiritual power, and the temptation to seek political power and social influence by evil means. But Jesus dismisses all three temptations using the Word of God. He quotes the Law from Scripture itself: "One does not live by bread alone" (Dt 8:3); "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (6:16); "Worship the Lord, your God" (6:13). Each time the devil tempts him Jesus responds with a quote from the Book of Deuteronomy which describes the experience of Israel during her forty years in the desert.

The first temptation: Is it possible to fast forty days and live to tell the tale? The New York Times says the average person can go for thirty days without eating. Gandhi and the Irish prisoners in British jails in Belfast fasted even longer. Mitch Snyder, the US advocate for the homeless, fasted fifty-one days. The first temptation could not have been better timed. Jesus had been fasting for forty days. He was entitled to eat. Even Israel in the Old Testament was miraculously fed with manna. Why not the Son of God? "Turn these stones into loaves of bread. Use your power to satisfy your physical need. You are entitled to food after a forty-day fast." The temptation was that Jesus use the miraculous powers God had given Him to use for His mission to provide for himself. This first temptation of Jesus was not merely the urge to satisfy his hunger by some miraculous deed. It also had implications as to how Jesus would respond to the physical needs of others, especially their need for food. Matthew tells us, for

example, that Jesus miraculously fed a multitude of people (14:13-21 and 15:32-39). Jesus would be seen as the Messiah who provided for their pressing needs.

The very seat of religious life, namely, the sacred precincts of the Temple itself became the scene of the second temptation. The devil was suggesting that, on the basis of Scripture, Jesus must believe in and insist on Divine protection: if He were the Son of God, He had the right to expect safety and protection from His heavenly Father. Here Jesus is pressured either to identify Himself as God's Son and Messiah, or to discredit His mission by apparently either denying His trust in God, the truth of Scripture or His own right to speak in God's Name. An additional temptation for Jesus was to use his miraculous powers to amaze people and thereby attract followers.

In the third temptation, the devil wanted Jesus to enter the world of political power to establish his kingdom of God instead of choosing the path that would lead to suffering, humiliation and death. It was a temptation to do the right thing using the wrong means. Jesus was being tempted to win the world by worshipping the devil. Why not compromise a bit? Why not strike a deal with the evil powers? Spirit-filled, sanctified, spiritually vibrant Christians are still subject to the same temptation. We need companionship, acceptance, the approval of others, love and appreciation. We are tempted to fulfill these legitimate needs using the wrong means.

Every one of us is tempted to seek sinful pleasures, easy wealth, and a position of authority, power, and glory, and to use any means, even unjust or sinful ones, to gain these things. Jesus serves as a model for us in conquering temptations by strengthening himself through prayer, penance, and the active use of the Word of God. Temptations make us more powerful warriors of God by strengthening our minds and hearts. By constantly struggling against temptations, we become stronger. Each time one is tempted to do evil but does good, one becomes stronger. Further, we are never tempted beyond our power. In his first letter, St. John assures us: "Greater is the One Who is in us, than the one who is in the world (1 Jn 4: 4). We may be strengthened by St. Paul's words in 1 Cor 10:13: "No testing has overtaken you, that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and [God] will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing [God] will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it." Hence, during this Lent, let us confront our evil tendencies by prayer, especially by participating in the Holy Mass, by penance, and by meditative reading of the Bible.

We are to grow in holiness by prayer, reconciliation and sharing during Lent. a) by finding time to be with God every day of Lent, speaking to Him in fervent prayer and listening to Him through the meditative reading of the Bible; b) by repenting of our sins daily and asking God's forgiveness every night at bedtime; c) by being reconciled with God through the Sacrament of Reconciliation; d) by being reconciled with others, forgiving them the hurts they have caused us and asking their pardon for the hurts we have inflicted on them; e) by sharing our love with others through selfless, humble service, almsgiving, and helping those in need; f) by living the Gospel, or the Good News, of God's love, mercy, and forgiveness in our lives, thus bearing true Christian witness.

Dear brothers and sisters, Lent is the time for the desert experience. We can set aside a place and time to be alone daily with God, a time to distance ourselves from the many noises that bombard our lives every day, a time to hear God's word, a time to rediscover who we are before God, and a time to say yes to God and no to Satan as Jesus did.