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Commentary on the Gospel: Jesus in the Wilderness

Gospel for the 1st Sunday in Lent (Cycle B), and commentary.

Gospel (*Mk 1:12-15*)

The Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, “The time

is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.”

Commentary

Today we celebrate the first Sunday in Lent. In the gospel we see our Lord led under the impulse of the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to pray and fast for forty days. Mark's account of this period in Jesus' life is very brief. He makes no reference to the three specific temptations Jesus underwent, as recounted by Matthew and Luke, and simply says that he “was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan.”

From a superficial point of view, we might ask why Jesus allowed himself to be tempted in the first place. But the parallel narrative in Matthew states that Jesus “was led up by the

Spirit into the wilderness” precisely “to be tempted by the devil” (*Mt 4:1*). This episode teaches us that Jesus, and not the devil, is the one who takes the initiative in the struggle between good and evil. The Book of Revelation states that it is also Michael and his angels who start the battle against the devil to overcome him (*Rev 12:7*). Jesus takes the initiative, and it is only after he has been prepared by his forty days of intense prayer and fasting that the devil is allowed to approach him.

Today’s scene shows us that our condition as children of God revealed at our Lord’s Baptism in the Jordan – “Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased” (*Mk 1:11*) – should lead us to take the initiative in the struggle against evil and sin, trusting in God’s grace. It is not a question of relying on own strength or foolishly placing ourselves in what we know is an occasion of sin for us. Rather it

means not being defensive in our effort to behave as God's sons and daughters, upon whom God the Father looks with delight, despite our missteps and mistakes.

The saints have always lived with this positive and active sense of struggle, because their eyes were set not on themselves but on Christ, who struggled and conquered in them. Saint Augustine said: “Certainly Christ was tempted by the devil. In Christ you were tempted, since Christ received his flesh from your nature, but by his own power gained salvation for you; He suffered death in your nature, but by his own power gained glory for you; therefore, He suffered temptation in our nature, but by his own power gained victory for you. If in Christ we have been tempted, in Him we overcome the devil. Do you think only of Christ’s temptations and fail to think of his victory? See yourself as tempted in

Him, and see yourself as victorious in Him. He could have kept the devil from himself, but if He were not tempted He couldn't teach you how to triumph over temptation.”[1]

Therefore as we begin the season of Lent, Jesus' example teaches us to take the initiative in our hope-filled struggle against evil and sin.

One clear way to take the initiative in our struggle is to be faithful to a set time for prayer each day, despite all the reasons invented by our laziness or “busyness” to miss this daily encounter. The determination to follow closely in the Master's footsteps means that we too will experience trials and temptations in our lives. But these are not signs that our effort or prayer is fruitless, but rather all the contrary. Saint Teresa of Avila said: “The traitor [the devil] knows that if a soul perseveres in prayer it will be lost to him.”[2]

Hence the devil tries to provoke a

false humility and careless spirit in us so that we will stop praying and lose the initiative in our struggle. For he knows that prayer is a shield that is always effective against him.

[1] Saint Augustine, Commentary on Psalm 60.

[2] Saint Teresa of Avila, *Life*, 19,5.

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