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Jesus' Temptations and Ours

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First Sunday of Lent

February 17, 2013 Sunday Readings for Cycle C:

Dt 26:4-10; Ps 91; Rom 10:8-13; Lk 4:1-13

JESUS' TEMPTATIONS AND OURS

Lawrence E. Frizzell

The problem of sin and temptation seems to be ignored by many in our society, or explained as part of a psychological theory that denies free will. However, the public interest focused on the sensational accusations about the rich and famous is perhaps an indication that standards of personal morality have not been eroded entirely. In each case it seems obvious that "somebody should have known better!"

During the season of Lent, the Church points out the social consequences of sin and "must impress on the minds of the faithful the distinctive character of penance as a detestation of sin because it is an offense against God. The role of the Church in penitential practices is not to be passed over, and the need to pray for sinners should be emphasized" (Vatican II, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* #109).

Both good and evil in the moral order are evaluated in the context of our relationship with God and neighbor. To help us appreciate our solidarity with others as God's people, the liturgy draws upon a description of Temple liturgy from the Book of Deuteronomy. The bond forming individuals into a people transcends the ages. Each generation can identify with those ancestors who wandered from Mesopotamia to Egypt and with Moses and those he led out of slavery into the service of God in their own land. In times of peace and abundance people tend to consider themselves self-sufficient; then they often forget their bond to God and the community. The offering of first-fruits of the harvest was an occasion throughout the year to thank God for the gifts of land and rain (Dt. 26:10). The tithes were given to the Levite, the stranger, the orphan and the widow, reminding the farmer of his obligation toward the less fortunate in his midst (Dt 26:12-15).

The Gospel describes Jesus undergoing the same temptations that we all face in the varied circumstances of life. "We have a high priest who has been tempted in every way that we are, though he is without sin" (Heb 4:15). Matthew and Luke depict the drama as a three-step contest between Jesus and the devil. The first temptation is to use divine power for self-gratification. The need for life's necessities, such as food, should be satisfied through the fabric of our human relationships, through the exercise of our natural talents. In the Lord's prayer, the petition for daily bread is in the *plural*. Jesus' response adds the perspective of the spiritual order, quoting from Deuteronomy. "Not by bread alone does one live but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of the Lord" (8:3).

The desire for power and wealth can replace God as the center of a person's life and thus constitute idolatry. Jesus is tempted to gain all the world's kingdoms with their power and glory. He rejects the temptation to align with forces of evil and uses Deuteronomy 6:13 to express his commitment to the one God. A good end never justifies the choice of wrong means!

Perhaps Luke changed the order of the temptations (see Mt 4:1-11) so that Jerusalem and the Temple would be the climax of the series (see Lk 2:22 and 41; 9:51). The devil abuses the Scriptures (Ps 91:11-12) to insinuate that the title "Son of God" would permit Jesus to be rescued miraculously if he were to jump from the heights of the Temple. Do some Christians expect God to do great things for them merely for their self-aggrandizement? The temptation of presumption must be rejected as resolutely as the tendency to despair that afflicts some people. Beware of those who make facile use of Scripture! Jesus puts the psalm in the proper context by a basic principle: "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test!" (Dt 6:16). We are obliged to serve God, so it is folly to demand that God rescue us from our own stupidity.

Luke comments that the devil left Jesus, to await another opportunity (4:13); this came through the weakness of Judas Iscariot (22:3). Jesus took a risk in choosing human collaborators, and he continues to do so through the ages. Are we learning the lessons of the temptations? Does our Lenten penance include an effort to remedy the tragic consequences of sin in our lives?