

First Sunday of Lent - C

One of the ways that we can read the story about Jesus being tempted in the desert is from the perspective of Jesus' identity: "If you are the Son of God..." Satan says.

But the temptations of Jesus can also be seen from the perspective of Jesus' mission. They are all wrong ways of thinking about God's mission and how to carry it out.

Even though they occur at the beginning of Jesus' ministry they will form a backdrop against which Jesus proceeds to proclaim the kingdom of God.

For Jesus, there will always be, for example, the possibility of seeing himself as a miracle worker who is about nothing more than healing the sick, giving eyesight to the blind, etc. Many of those who encountered him would be happy with that much.

There would always be the opportunity for Jesus to make his mission about seizing power from the wicked, and establishing an earthly kingdom that would limit itself to a particular time and place.

And, given that many were always asking for a sign that would provide them with certainty that what Jesus said and did came from God, there was always the possibility of letting his mission slip into the orbit of calming

people's fears and heeding their anxiety.

The temptations Jesus encountered in the desert are actually quite similar to the false interpretations of others who saw him and how they wanted him to perform, and this persisted throughout the entire time he was preaching and teaching and healing.

But the biggest problem with these interpretations is that they all fall short of what God intended to do with the sending of his Son into the world.

Certainly, Jesus is concerned about those who do not have enough to live lives of human dignity. And yet, he also recognizes from the history of Israel that provided food in the desert, for example, did not make the Israelites grateful for the gift, but ended up making them more demanding.

The people stayed on the physical level of existence and never moved beyond it, dragging God down to the level of a slave.

What God was trying to accomplish with his miraculous action was the transformation of human hearts, so that we would learn that there's more to life than physical well-being. Part of Jesus' mission is to hold on to that truth, to protect it and promote it.

First Sunday of Lent - C

The fact that Jesus refrains from food for forty days suggests that he personally knows that “one does not live by bread alone.”

Not willing to give up easily Satan tries a more subtle temptation. He shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world in a single instant. Essentially, he is saying, “This is how the world works. I will help you rise to the top of it.” In order to do so, Jesus will have to use the devil’s tools of “accuse, divide and conquer.”

Of course, the Son of God should be concerned about bettering the social conditions that structure human life. The temptation is to do that by playing the world’s games that will get Jesus to a position of power.

But Jesus is already committed to another strategy. He does the will of the Father whose way is forgiveness and reconciliation. Jesus will be the one who asks forgiveness for those who nail him to the cross.

For Jesus the way forward is not to accuse, divide and conquer but to be converted, to forgive and be reconciled. This path is not to be found in the kingdoms of the world.

The last temptation can be summed up in the demand that God “give us a sign so that we might believe in you.”

The devil suggests to Jesus that he do this up front, at the beginning of his ministry, so that there will be no room for anyone to argue with him. A sign like falling from the parapet of the temple without injury would convince every one.

But from Jesus’ point of view the problem with this strategy is its underlying assumption. As creatures of the Creator we are called to recognize that genuine religious and moral action is the essential sign that people are living in God’s love.

This is the only test: Can we imitate the love of God?

When people ask for a sign they are basically demanding that God be like them, to share their anxiety and misgivings and their hankering for certitude.

The Son of God sees through this. Jesus’ refusal comes from the fact that he is a faithful adherent of the Covenant God made with his people: He holds fast to the basic trust that God will be his God, in all times and places. With that sort of trust, no sign is necessary.

As disciples of Jesus, we follow his lead and resist the temptations Satan suggested in the desert:

Instead of focusing on material things only we put them into the context of

First Sunday of Lent - C

what fullness of life in the reign of God is really about: living in relationship with the God who draws us to himself and with His creation.

Rather than engage in the worldly ways of exercising power and influence through accusation, division and conquest we practice the kingdom ways of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Instead of seeking the certitude of signs, we simply trust in the goodness of God who will not abandon those who seek to do his will and live according to his Spirit.

In pursuing those strategies we will show ourselves as co-workers in the mission of Jesus to bring about God's kingdom on earth.