

In the gospel lesson on this first Sunday in Lent, we visit again Christ's temptation in the wilderness. As you recall we read this morning, immediately after His baptism, Christ was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted. We tend to focus on the temptations presented Christ by the devil, but also notice this, the beginning of His trials—fasting for forty days. Then after that, while still reeling from the hunger of His fast, He was tempted by the devil. First, He had to face His own bodily demands, and then He faced the taunting and tempting levied at Him by His adversary.

On reading this, we first usually ask, "Why? Why must Jesus endure this episode of fasting and temptation?" The answer is so that He would be the perfection of humanity; not only in His being, for in fact He was humanity perfected and unfailing, but also in all of His actions. He demonstrated to all creatures in the universe that He extravagantly succeeded where Adam and Eve and all of their offspring had disastrously failed. Jesus' actions demonstrated to all who honestly consider Him, that He was the exact image of God worthy of all to be worshiped. In Adam, we all disobeyed God and are therefore subject to death. But in Christ, humanity has perfectly obeyed God, and those who draw near to Christ share in His perfection, growing in living godly lives. Christ's battle with the flesh and with the devil demonstrates the utter powerlessness of the devil when confronted with the perfection of humanity.

To dig a little deeper: yes, Christ endured the wilderness temptation to become the perfect representative of humanity. But why was this important? Let's generalize this question even more. Why did Christ become one of us? Why did He take on flesh and bone like us? Why did he suffer here and in His ministry and in His passion and torment and death? Why did he rise again, finally ascending into heaven? We are saved by the entirety of Christ's early ministry even though we look to the resurrection as the chief victory. The deeper answer is so that we, humanity, could be united with God as God had always intended. Satan's initial attempt in the Garden of Eden to derail God's intent would not ultimately succeed, because God's plans can never be thwarted. The Creator is the Only God, the True Source of All Being. Satan is only a stooge that allows God's glory to be more extensively revealed.

Jesus Christ succeeded where mankind failed so that mankind could be united with God. But let's not stop there. Jesus didn't seek this outcome merely out of duty to the Creation. He didn't even complete His work motivated only by love though surely that would have been

enough. He came to earth, endured the trial of the wilderness temptations, and all of the trials of His ministry, His death and resurrection, because He truly desired the ecstatic joy that was to be had by God and man through His suffering. He suffered because the reward was surpassingly glorious. The final union of God and man was exceedingly worth the pain He endured.

Yet we human beings are pretty oblivious to God's eternal and divine motivation. We are consumed by the moment in which we exist. But there are some examples of those who have transcended the momentary life, to glimpse the divine reality of our Creator; and having glimpsed God, they realize that God is the only thing really worth striving for. St. Paul, of course, met Jesus face to face on the road to Damascus, and this encounter motivated him to go, preach, and suffer spreading the good news of what is in store for humanity in Jesus Christ.

But Consider also an anecdote about St. Thomas Aquinas. He is best known for His *Summa Theologica*, but as a monk, he spent much time in prayer and contemplation. One day during his devotions, around the time when Thomas was drawing near to finishing the *Summa*, as it is commonly known, he had a vision of God who spoke to him. "You have written well of me, Thomas; what do you desire?" His reply was: "*Non nisi Te, Domine*" – that is, "Nothing but You, O Lord."

*Non nisi Te, Domine*. Nothing but You, Lord. This should be the motivation of all those who follow Jesus Christ. We were made for union with God, but except for the relatively few instances of directly encountering God like the Apostle and Thomas Aquinas, we cannot fully understand the joy and fulfillment that is waiting for us in this union until we come to the end of this life, to the end of this world. Until then, we must trust what God says, what He has revealed. But also, let us remember that we too can catch glimpses of God, and such glimpses help us to long more earnestly for God, who is Himself our eternal reward.

Where do we catch these glimpses? Certainly in the sacraments. In baptism God gives us His Spirit to help sustain and guide us in this life and as a seal that we belong to God. And also in the Eucharist, God strengthens us for the journey by His consistent gift of grace and assures us that we are truly members of God in Jesus Christ. And there are other opportunities for grace ministered by the Church throughout our lives – the so-called minor sacraments such as

confirmation, marriage, and the sacrament of reconciliation. These are all means that have been established to encourage us, here and now, to endure the suffering of this present life.

Besides the grace to be found in the ministrations of the Church, we also see glimpses of our final union with God in the love that we share with each other. We are collectively the temple of God with Christ being the chief cornerstone. We are member of the Body of Christ and Jesus is the Head. In Christ we are one, and that oneness is expressed in the special and unique love that we have for each other. Everyone of us is on pilgrimage in this life, but that does not mean that we journey alone. We are a great company, ascending toward the holiness of God so that we may know, in the fullest way, the love of God. There are times along the way where we must take up one another's burdens. And sometimes, we must even carry each other. It is so important to know that none of us are alone. We have Jesus. We have each other in the love of Jesus.

And lastly let us not forget that sometimes we catch glimpses of our final union with God from God Himself in those unique encounters ways. After Christ's temptation, angels came and ministered to Jesus. Christ was called upon to exert Himself mightily and to overcome His own fleshly desires and the temptations with which the devil confronted Him. But having battled the flesh and the devil, God then sends help to Him, providing healing and encouragement as Christ prepared for the next stage of His ministry. St. Thomas' vision was also like this – a special experience that God sometimes chooses to give in order to further His divine purposes. We build no doctrine around such subjective experiences, but to note that they have profound impacts upon those who experience God in such mysterious ways. God has His own purposes. Let us be satisfied with the glimpses of grace given to us commonly, in the sacraments and in our fellowship. These signs sustain us for now, but they also point us to something very much greater to be had in the future. Let us truly learn to long for that.

But now, we also are reminded this morning that we have entered into the season of Lent. Christ fasted forty days, and thus we set aside forty days to image Him, practicing disciplines of the body as well. Let us remember that this was a common discipline in the time of Christ, with fasting mentioned several times in the New Testament. The Church is well within scriptural bounds to set aside this season and expect participation from its members. Fasting is a natural response to stress and anxiety, and in scripture it is often coupled with prayer. It is the unspoken prayer of the body. It's practice develops in us a sense of complete

dependence upon God, and becoming more dependent upon God is to become more aware of God's presence every moment. It is to become more united to God as we mourn those sins that keep us from Him. And it cultivates a greater resilience to the troubles we face in the world. In other words, fasting produces a greater dependence upon God while at the same time, producing independence from the world.

Fasting, therefore is a gift to aid us in becoming more united to God. Throughout history, the Church has reminded us to conform our lives to Christ. This means not only to fast and repent and prepare with urgency in the penitential seasons, but also to feast and celebrate in the festive seasons. The friends of the bridegroom do not fast when He is with them, "... but the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days." So in the life of the Church, and therefore in the lives of each of us, we have times of fasting and times of feasting. The goal of both is that we may draw closer to God, so that we would know God better as we learn dependence upon Him, and also know *the joy* of that dependence.

Therefore, my admonition to you today is to embrace this season of Lent. Let the wisdom of the Church through the ages into your lives, so that you would experience the deep spiritual formation that is to be found there. Let us not procrastinate to employ these means of grace: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation. Let us act with this sense of urgency in our Lenten disciplines, seeing them as an opportunity to glimpse God yet again. And having glimpsed God, may we further long for His grace appointed for us in the sacraments and for the grace given us through one another, so that, along with St. Thomas Aquinas, our hearts' longings would be directed only to God. Non nisi Te, Domine. Nothing but You, Lord. Nothing but You.

In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. AMEN.