



VOLUME 3 NUMBER 3
MARCH 2014

ISSN 2166-1146

Elizabeth Shaw, Editor

Teaching the Faith

A PUBLICATION OF THE
FELLOWSHIP OF CATHOLIC SCHOLARS

The Mystery of Salvation – Temptations and Recovering Intimacy with God

By Deacon Stephen Miletic, Ph.D.

*First Sunday of Lent
March 9, 2014*

*Readings: Genesis 2.7-9, 3.1-7; Romans 5.12-19;
Matthew 4.1-11*

During Lent believers enter more deeply into the mystery of Jesus' life, suffering, and death, and we offer our human experience of vulnerability, limitation, weakness, confusion, and sin to him. In turn, when we encounter Christ's sufferings and victories in scripture and the liturgy, a great and authentic light is shed on our own personal experiences of suffering.

We could characterize the substance of our Lenten journey as the recovery of intimacy with and filial love for God, brought about by Jesus' obedient suffering in the desert and at the crucifixion. His suffering teaches us about human vulnerability, as well as the demonic powers so hateful toward humans and God.

Our Total Dependence

The selection of today's first reading from Genesis is by no means accidental. These verses bring us to the protological beginning of human life, showing our total dependence on God. They express the tone and focus of the whole of salvation history, in which we find sin, death, and redemption.

Life is Good! How much 'more good' can it get? We exist not by accident but with divine intent; our existence is imbued with a share in our Creator's Life. God brings non-life into Life! God transmits Life close up and (literally) in our face ("and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life"). If that isn't enough, God creates an environment that sustains our life both physically and spiritually: he gives us food, direct knowledge of his person, and an innate knowledge of good and evil. We have everything we need. God is Good!

And yet, Eve and then Adam are tempted, tested by the evil Serpent, the Dragon, the Master of Lies. He begins by distorting the Word of God ("Did God really tell you not to eat from *any* of the trees in the garden?"). He then escalates the deception by directly challenging God's credibility, integrity, and trustworthiness ("You certainly will not die!"). In his final descent to the depths of breaking trust in God's goodness, he projects disingenuous intent onto God ("No, God knows well that the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know what is good and what is evil."). There it is, the hermeneutic of suspicion fully flowering – we think we can improve our lot by redefining good and evil. We think we can ultimately be like our Creator!

Shame and the Desire for Mercy

Our first parents failed the test. Afterward, they awoke to the experience of shame, as they were able to connect the dots between their act of pride and disobedience and their nakedness before each other and God. They felt the need to cover up their inner shame about their external nakedness. Thus arose new barriers between themselves and between them and God.

The tragic lapse of our first parents – the attempt to redefine good and evil – is repeated many times in the drama of salvation history, from ancient times up to today. All of humanity has been touched by shame, guilt, and alienation. Every culture bears witness to our brokenness. And our own shame entails the same sort of alienation, just as it drove our first parents to hide from God. It is the fruit of broken intimacy with God and with each other.

The Psalmist seems to understand some important things about this broken intimacy. Above all, it cannot be repaired by even the loftiest, most heroic of human efforts. This means that a plea for divine mercy is required. The mercy is a divine work of pouring out feminine tenderness, a balm that soothes and restores. It is received as a pure and undeserved gift, a gentle love, a divine forgiveness that heals the soul's wound.

The desire for restored intimacy with God is entirely dependent on God, but it is also something of which the desiring recipient is acutely aware. The Psalmist seeks a “clean heart,” a renewed “steadfast spirit,” a renewed experience of the “joy of your salvation.” It’s almost as if this desire for God’s mercy is a cry for renewal, to become a new creation.

A Radically New Kind of Life

Saint Paul’s typological treatment of the devastating impact of Adam’s sin on all of humanity, and the far greater impact of the gift of grace, is amazing. The gift of grace far exceeds the trespass of sin. While our sin calls for just condemnation, and even a death sentence, faith in Jesus Christ brings an abundance of grace that far exceeds the trespass of sin. The Divine Person’s complete embrace of death shares the innermost hidden life of God with us; it is an overflowing reality meant for the many.

Such a personal gift first satisfies all of the just requirements of divine law, bringing the moral order back to equilibrium. It also brings the penitent into a radically new kind of life. Shame, guilt, and condemnation are eradicated; death is defeated, overcome; a new creation ensues. That grace is focused on merciful forgiveness, which brings the power of transformative love, something that goes beyond simply recapturing our original innocence. The power of faith received makes us a *new creation* generated by our bond with Christ.

The good news is that the gift of grace, of a new Life, of the deepest of intimacy with God, is far greater than the human act of pride which Saint Paul calls the transgression.

Into the Desert

Today’s gospel tells the story how Jesus was led into the desert for forty days and nights, just after he was anointed by the Holy Spirit. His fasting during this time communicates several important truths about the Father’s desire for intimacy with his sons and daughters.

First and foremost, Jesus’ trek is an act of filial, obedient love for the Father, prompted by the Spirit. Second, the forty days represent a continuous period of communion with the Father, which will not be broken by any of the frailties of human suffering, including hunger and loneliness. The mystery of Jesus’ human suffering in the desert anticipates his suffering, passion, and death at the crucifixion, where filial obedience and trust are even more severely tested.

Third, this obedience to the Father through the prompting of the Holy Spirit reverses our historic disobedience. Jesus’ filial love and obedience is universal, encompassing all human suffering and vulnerability to sin, and thereby nullifying the original disobedience of Adam and Eve. In Jesus we now see what full love is: not even the gravest threats to human life can diminish it, including the circumstances in the desert and the desolation of the cross. Indeed, these show the depths of the Son’s love for the Father.

Fourth, the forty days echo ancient Israel’s journey of forty years in the desert, replete with the experiences of rebellion, infidelity, and sin. This son of Adam, Abraham, and David, this human flesh of Israel, is the first to overcome completely the rebellion against God’s will and to actualize God’s original intent, not just for Israel but for the whole human race. In the words of Saint Irenaeus:

When Christ became incarnate and was made man, he recapitulated in himself the long history of mankind and procured for us a "short cut" to salvation, so that what we had lost in Adam, that is, being in the image and likeness of God, we might recover in Christ Jesus. For this reason Christ experienced all the stages of life, thereby giving communion with God to all men. (CCC 518; cf. 520-21, Rom 5-6)

The object to be recovered is the human ability to bond with the Father, in Christ, through the Spirit. From the level of suffering in Jesus’ public ministry, we learn that God’s passion for intimacy with us is deep, longstanding, and something that comes at a great price.

The Tempter tests the Son of God’s intimate bond with the Father at three fundamental levels: basic human need (food); the reduction of divine power to a show of force (“lest you dash your foot against a stone”); and political and economic power (“all these I shall give you”). These temptations are experienced in a variety of ways. They lie at the deepest levels of human experience and are points of reference to our personal well-being and social and economic stability, or lack thereof.

To succumb to these temptations is often to manifest real power. Jesus could have wowed the crowds and quickly drawn a cult-like following. Still, all this would have been a distraction from the message of God’s love of us, his desire for us, and our need for him. Instead, Jesus’ public ministry shows humility, patience, other-centered service, filial obedience – all of which leads to forgiveness at the crucifixion.

What do we make of Jesus’ temptations, then? And what about our own experiences?

Jesus’ forty days of solitude with the Father encapsulate the fundamentals of ordinary human experience in an extraordinarily compressed and salvific way. They show how humanity was intended to respond to the temptation of breaking friendship with God, and how each of us ought to respond in our own lives: Complete dependency on God is the most secure, most authentically human act possible.

Temptations play a special role in our formation and bond with God. They reveal opportunities for spiritual growth; they teach us something about ourselves and about God. They have great catechetical value, because when we reflect on them we learn more about where our “treasures” truly reside. Temptations uncover what is dark in us; the attractions and lures rooted in broken human passions show us the false “pearls of great price” that reside in our hearts and draw us away from God, who alone is the true Pearl of Great Price.

These tests teach us that we are attracted by things that appear to be good but in fact are not. We know that a powerful inclination toward the merely apparent good still lives inside us, the baptized. So what are we to do?

As we approach the Eucharist, let us ask the Holy Spirit to lead us into our own deserts, to open up an awareness of where we experience threats such as shame, guilt, rebellion against God, hatred of our enemies, and perhaps even anger because our needs are greater than our resources.

As you receive the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of our risen Lord hidden under bread and wine, offer some darkness of your soul to him. If the real you shows up at reception – with real shame, guilt, remorse, anguish – then the God of all creation will give himself to you and bring love, peace, serenity. There you will find the new creation that is you, taking the next step toward joy and freedom, as authentic sons and daughters of God. You will find intimacy with the Lord.

About the Author

Deacon Stephen F. Miletic, Ph.D., is Professor of Scripture in the Theology Department at Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio.

FOR FURTHER READING

Benedict XVI, "Angelus" (February 21, 2010), available at:

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/angelus/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_ang_20100221_en.html

Catechism of the Catholic Church, ##538-540ff.

Francis Gigot, "The Temptation of Christ," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 14 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), available at: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14504b.htm>

John Paul II, "On the Devil," available at: <http://www.ewtn.com/library/NEWAGE/JP2DEVIL.htm>

Rev. Roger J. Landry, "Christ's Temptations and Ours," available at:

<http://catholiceducation.org/articles/religion/re0781.html>

Rev. James Schall, S.J., "God Is the Issue': The Temptation in the Desert and the Kingdoms of This World," available at:

http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2007/schall_godistheissue_jun07.asp



VOLUME 3 NUMBER 3
MARCH 2014

ISSN 2166-1146

Elizabeth Shaw, Editor

IN SHORT . . .

- ***We exist not by accident but with divine intent; our existence is imbued with a share in our Creator's Life, and he gives us everything we need.***
- ***Still, we think we can improve our lot by redefining good and evil. We think we can ultimately be like our Creator!***
- ***The gift of grace and the deepest of intimacy with God is far greater than our prideful transgressions.***
- ***Jesus could have assumed all manner of temporal powers, but his public ministry shows humility, patience, other-centered service, filial obedience.***
- ***Jesus' suffering teaches us that God's passion for intimacy with us is deep, longstanding, and something that comes at a great price.***
- ***Temptations reveal opportunities for spiritual growth by uncovering what is dark in us and teaching us that we are attracted by things that appear to be good but in fact are not.***