

Lent 1 (c)

Our Gospel today, the story of the Lord's being tempted in the desert by Satan, begins and ends on a rather ominous note. At the beginning of the account, we read: "Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert for forty days, to be tempted by the devil." And at the end of the story we read: "When the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him for a time."

So here we are confronted with a triptych, that is, a picture or painting with three parts to it. We have all seen many triptychs of Christian art. They are popular on our Christmas cards. One scene stands in the middle, the other two are on its sides, the folding sides. The scene of the crucifixion, for example, is a natural triptych because Jesus was crucified, we are told, between two criminals, one on each side of him. I am not well informed in paintings, but I cannot imagine that no one during the last two thousand years has painted a triptych of Jesus' temptation in the desert. Clearly, Jesus has to be in the middle and the devil and the Holy Spirit on the two sides. And perhaps a painter could show Satan departing from Jesus, for we are told that he does: "When

the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him for a time.” So he could be depicted as slinking away.

But is it not interesting that the Holy Spirit and the devil are brought together with the Lord in this scene. Indeed it almost seems as though the Holy Spirit engineers this meeting, this conflict. Yes, that is indeed what we are led to believe by the text, for it says: Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert . . . to be tempted by the devil.” Can the Spirit lead Jesus, and if Jesus, then us, into the desert so that we can be tempted? That does not sound right. There is an echo in my head which says that somewhere in the OT we are told not to say that God tempts us, that we should not blame God for our temptations which come from our own bad behavior and weaknesses. We should not blame God for our sins; we should take responsibility for them. Nevertheless, here this passage is telling us the opposite. The Spirit leads Jesus into the desert so that he can be tempted by the devil.

And what is the intention of the three synoptic Gospel writers in giving us this text? Is it founded on an actual event? Did Jesus, before beginning his ministry, spend time in seclusion in the desert, and was he tempted in this way there? Or is the intention of the Gospel writers to tell us that Jesus, who summarizes the history

of his people in his own career and life, did in the desert what his people had failed to do? So often the people fell into sin, worshipping a golden calf and questioning the God who had led them into the desert to die of hunger. But Jesus succeeds where they failed. Is that the purpose of this scene: to show that Jesus has triumphed where they failed? Indeed, in each of the temptations Jesus answers the evil one with a quote from his people's Scriptures: twice from the Book of Deuteronomy and once from Psalm 91, which is our responsorial psalm today and contains the words used in the third temptation: "With their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone." So that explanation seems to make sense. Here Jesus writes straight with the crooked lines of his people's past. Here he succeeds where they failed. He lives not on bread but on the word of God. He worships God alone, and he does not put God to the test.

Here we see Jesus victorious over the evil one, but we have to leave unanswered the question of the place of the Holy Spirit in the devil's tempting of the Lord. However, looking at ourselves, we can ask how we see the Holy Spirit and the evil one working in our lives. And if we are uncomfortable with talking about Satan or the devil, we can think instead about evil and the temptation to do what is evil, which we recognize as real in our lives and in the

lives of those around us. How do these two forces work today? How do we see them working in society today? How do we see them working in our own lives, in our families, in our church?

Recently someone sent me an article in which the author bemoaned the fact that in the church we are not really told what we need to do to be spiritually healthy today. He talks about a friend named Janet who has given up on church and everything else and feels fine only about joining the local organic foods co-op. Why them? he asked her. Her answer was: Because they know that I'm not good enough. In other words, they will tell her straight out that she has to change her diet and life-style. Their frank approach meets the discontent which she feels in herself with herself.

The author, David Paul Deavel, editor of *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, thinks that we should be just as direct in the church. Speaking to preachers he says: "Don't tell us that we are alright, don't tell us we are doing fine. Describing himself, he says: "Shivering and feeling my insides rotting away I am advised to take two aspirin and come to Mass on Sunday once in a while---that is, if it's not too much trouble." He would prefer if the church would grab us by the chin and tell us that we are dust and unto dust we shall return, or tell us point-plank to turn away

from our sins. “Why do so many people come to get ashes?” he asks. Because they want to hear the bad news of the Gospel. They are dying . Therefore, “the task of the preacher is it to repeat out loud the diagnosis written on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday and then ask us the corresponding question: Are you willing to undergo the treatment you started at your baptism?” Quoting from the Letter to the Hebrews, he writes: “Tell me I have to ‘cast off every encumbrance weighing me down, especially sin, which so easily entangles’” (Hebrews 12:1) “Tell me to stiffen my ‘slack hands and tottering knees’ (12:12) knowing that God himself will hold on to me the whole time. Tell me that my own ‘resistance in the struggle against sin’ has not yet ‘gone as far as bloodshed’ (12:4) and that I must be ready for the Divine surgeon’s knife. Tell me that the Divine Surgeon tested the therapy on himself and stands ready and, when I’m ready, will fill me with a blood transplant taken from his own side. Tell me I’m not good enough. Tell me I’m dying. Tell me the treatment is disturbing and drastic, that it will take up all of my time. Tell me I’ll have to give up lots of things I like and take up other things I hate. Tell me it’s worth it. Tell me I need Jesus in the worst possible way.”

Could that be what we should take from the Lord’s temptation in the desert? Was he there beginning to learn what his messiahship

would demand of him? And did he need the spirit on one side to help him overcome the devil's temptation on the other? And what about us?