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First Sunday of Lent

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The Peace Pulpit

Since we accept the truth about Jesus, that he is fully human as we are, we can readily understand that he underwent temptations, that the devil could tempt him as we hear in today's gospel. It could be temptations like anyone of us experience, temptations to be dishonest perhaps or temptations to speak something unkindly about another person or temptations to get angry and so on.

But the temptation that we hear about today is much more profound. It's a temptation about the whole direction of the life Jesus. A temptation about a very profound choice that Jesus has to make. The kind of choice that each one of us also at some point in our life must make.

Why do I say that? Why is this such a profound temptation?

Well, we have to look at what happens in today's gospel within the context of the events before and after this time in the desert. Just before Jesus went off into the desert where we heard Luke tell us that the Spirit drove Jesus into the desert, Luke had just described the baptism of Jesus, a very profound and significant moment in the life of Jesus. He submitted himself to John just as another sinner, even though Jesus himself was without sin. He joined with all those who were sinners and allowed himself to be baptized. And then Luke said he came up out of the water and went apart to pray and that as he was praying he experienced an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. A very profound experience in his life. And in that outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Jesus heard God saying to him, "This is my son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

That is how those words are put into the gospel, but they are really from the beginning of the 42nd chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus would have known those words, and when he heard the Spirit speaking those words, he knew what words came after: "This is my servant, my chosen one, in whom I am well pleased. He does not cry aloud in the streets. He does not quench the wavering flame, or crush the bruised reed. Yet he brings true justice and peace to all the nations."

Brings justice and peace to the whole world. This is the servant of God. And Jesus understands he is being called by God to be that servant. That means that he has to work to bring peace and justice into the world in which we live. But to do it in a very special way. He does not cry aloud in the streets, that servant of God. That cry in the street was a call to arms, and so the servant God rejects arms, rejects violence, rejects war. That's not the way you bring peace. Instead you do it through love. Because you take the wavering flame and you draw it into fullness. You take that bruised reed and you nurture it until it is it's alive, fully alive. That's how you bring peace and justice into the world. It's a very daunting and challenging call. To bring justice into all of the world, to bring peace. A world without violence. To not resort to arms. To do it only through love.

That's why Jesus went off to pray. He desperately needed to deepen his awareness of God in his life to be able to follow that way of God. And then the devil begins to tempt him. The first thing is about the resources of the Earth. "Turn that stone into bread, have all the wealth that you want. Accumulate it to yourself; it's all yours if you want it. All the wealth of the world it's yours." That's so different if you remember the first lesson today, where the chosen people are described as coming before God in a ritual offering. They are bringing the first fruits, what God has given on this earth, and they are saying, "These are from God, we give them back to God. They are not for us alone." And that's the spirit we need to have toward material things, toward wealth. They are not really ours, they belong to God and so they belong to everybody.

Jesus was being tempted, as all of us are at times, to be selfish, to hold for ourselves whatever we have, not to share it. To forget that it really belongs to God. It comes from God and belongs to God. That's unjust when you hold to yourself. So Jesus is being called, as are we, to share whatever we have., never to accumulate for ourselves alone, never to forget that whatever we have comes from God and God alone.

And then of course Jesus is tempted. All the kingdoms of the Earth. What does that mean? Well it means that you would have armies, you would have power, you could use violence to do whatever you wanted. All through history we've been tempted, human beings have been tempted, to do that. But often, almost always you have to say, we give into that temptation. We try to bring justice and peace, or we say we are, through war. We have to say no to that.

And then finally Jesus is being tempted to, well in a way to be very arrogant, to presume that he can throw himself off that pinnacle of the temple and God would have to save him. That's presumption, arrogance. And arrogance, presumption and pride can lead us to be violent and to be selfish.

Now what Jesus confronted is the same thing that we confront today. We live in a world, as Jesus did, that was very violent. The time of Jesus, he was living in a country that was occupied by a foreign army, like

we occupy Iraq right now. It was harsh and violent. People died cruelly, just as people are dying in Iraq right now. So what Jesus confronted is not very different from what we confront as we look at the world around us.

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In fact a couple of years ago, Pope John Paul II confronted us with this question about living in a world where there is so much violence and how do you change it. In a world in which the power of evil seems once again to have taken the upper hand, how can that world be transformed into a world in which the noblest aspirations of the human heart will triumph? How can that world be transformed into a world in which true justice and peace will prevail? How do you change the world in which we live, the kind of world in which Jesus lived, a world in which the power of evil seems to have the upper hand?

John Paul wrote this shortly after we were attacked on September 11, 2001. He said, "Recent events including the terrible killings of September 11th, moved me return to a theme which often stirs in the depths of my heart. The enormous suffering of peoples and individuals, even among my own friends and acquaintances, caused by Nazi and Communist totalitarianism has never been far from my thoughts and prayers. So I am often paused to reflect on the persistent question: How do we restore the moral and social order subjected to such horrific violence? My recent conviction and affirmed in truth by biblical revelation is that the shattered order cannot be fully restored except by a response that combines justice with that special kind of love we call forgiveness. The pillars of true peace are justice and that form of love we call forgiveness - enemy love."

That's the temptation that Jesus was confronted with. He lived in a world where the power of evil seemed to have the upper hand. How do you transform that world? How do you change it? We live in a world where the same thing is true. The power of evil seems to have the upper hand. There's violence, killing, injustice, people accumulating the wealth of the world for themselves. How do we change it? We are confronted with the same question Jesus was confronted with. God showed Jesus the way to do it, the way of nonviolence, the way of love, the way of sharing what you have. But Jesus was tempted. It's hard to follow that way. And he was tempted to give it all up, to go the way the devil directed him. But he chose the other way. The way of sharing what you have. The way of loving in response to hatred. The way of returning nonviolence with violence, returning love for hatred.

Now as we begin the season of Lent. We are faced with that same question that Jesus faced. Will we follow the way of God, the way revealed to Jesus through those words from the prophet Isaiah? Or will we follow the ways of so much of the world around us which calls on us to use violence and to be selfish?

The temptation of Jesus is not something remote and very far from our own lives. It's the same temptation that we're confronted with, the same choice that we have to make as Jesus. It's very hard to make that choice, but as we heard in the second lesson today, the word of God is present within each of us.

During this of season of Lent, we take extra time in our prayers to listen to that word of God within our own spirit, within our own hearts, to get the courage, the strength to follow the way of Jesus. Then like

Jesus, we can be the ones who bring true justice, true peace into the world in which we live, our small world, but also into the larger world in which we live. We commit ourselves in this season of Lent to listen to that word of God within us, so that we can find the courage to follow that word of God. Then, like Jesus, we will bring justice and peace to our world. We will follow the way of Jesus.

[This homily was recorded during Mass at The St. Francis Inn, Philadelphia, Pa.]

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