

First Sunday of Lent

On this first Sunday of Lent, a season that God lends to us to fine tune our souls in preparation for Easter, we note that the purpose of Lent is to remind us that we are not God and that we need him, we need to follow him. God led his people, the chosen ones, in the Mosaic covenant out of the slavery in Egypt to the wilderness of Sinai, where he could speak to their hearts. Our hearts were well formed on Ash Wednesday for this journey into the wilderness of the world to practise more penance, prayer and almsgiving. In short, three matters that refer to self, God and others.

Another triptych presented to us on this first Sunday of Lent is the three temptations of Christ. Each year when this theme is presented, I ponder anew its meaning and significance. We all know the basic data of the story: Jesus is alone in the wilderness and after forty days Satan comes and tempts him in three ways: food, wealth and power. In each case, the Lord notes the temptation and rebuffs the Evil One who retreats with haste. Some time ago, I fell upon a commentary by Fr Ronald Knox that sheds some light upon this event. As you recall, Knox died about 70 yrs ago and was an English convert to the Church who became a writer and renowned translator of the Bible. His family was unique, to say the least. The father was an Anglican bishop and all the children were educated in the classics from their earliest ages. His brother Alfred became a brilliant cryptographer or codebreaker during the war. At any rate, when Ronald became a Catholic priest, he was disinherited and to survive became a prolific writer.

In some of his writings to budding teachers, Knox postulates that these temptations were for us. He explains that we only know of their existence because Christ himself told us. Most of the events in the Scriptures, he adds, were witnessed by others, disciples or apostles who could note them down for later. But on this rare occasion there were no witnesses. Christ was alone. Later the Lord relayed to the apostles the facts of the event to teach them, and us, how to combat temptations.

Moreover, Knox asserts that there were three temptations. Why not two or four? The Lord being God could be tempted but did not sin, we however are tempted and we can. And it is precisely in these three domains that we can fall. Speak to any prison warden, sociologist, psychologist these are the three domains of human weakness. Our moral nature is cracked, fractured, wounded, call it what you like in these areas of bodily pleasures, want of things and control of others. Even our famous psychologists Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler and Carl Jung developed theories and psycho-analytic methods to try and cure us.

Some time back, I received a phone call from a prison warden who wanted to know if I would be a contact for an inmate. Once I knew who it was, I conceded. The man, a friend, is in jail because he has a bodily weakness, not with drugs, but drink which leads to violence. Alcohol fuelled violence is a daily reality in too many homes. Take away the drink and he's fine. And he is not alone. Nor is it an age issue. Many in Gen Z have addictions too, food and technology, to mention a few. We all know that it is a fine balance between their use and abuse. Do we control the phone or does the phone control us?

One of these three domains that receives less attention is the control or dominion of others. It's basically pride flaunting itself - my ego rules all. We all know of relationships at work, home, sporting clubs where certain types always have to have the last say. The loud mouthed coach or arrogant aunt or self-opinionated manager are common enough. But be warned also of control freaks – who can't let go – for they are masterful in their stealth. Sometimes such people dominate by micro-tuning your life or gaslighting. Such people control others, especially in families, by means of self pity and they can absorb you (like a sponge) into their orbit of never-ending needs – based on the poor me scenario.

During Lent we offset these three weaknesses by three virtues: 1. faith - focusing on God not self – eyes are for looking outward not inward. One great saint who did that was St. Mary Mackillop – always seeking to do His will before her own. Even when the establishment banished her... she just prayed more. Do we turn to God in adversity? 2. Generosity – giving rather than getting which is well epitomized in the life of Mother Teresa or St Vincent de Paul: renowned for their big hearts (e.g. his heart is incorrupt in Paris). Hence the need to promote Project Compassion and the works of mercy. 3 – Self-Control means being disciplined in our bodily wants. Our physical pleasures can be sated but they never satisfy the soul. We all desire peace of soul, inner contentment, a filling of the emptiness that lies within. Soul food comes not through the body, as St John Vianney well knew and St Catherine of Sienna well lived. By the way, she is perhaps the most politically influential woman in the history of the Church, dying in 1380 at the perfect age of 33 in Rome. Let us ask her and the other saints to help us in our prayer, fasting and good works this Lent.