

Today's gospel is, obviously, about temptation – something we're all acquainted with, something we try to resist with varying degrees of success, and something we don't really like to talk about – especially when it comes to our own. Oscar Wilde once joked, "The only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it." The only problem with that is that it always comes back again, and again, and again, and again!

Perhaps you've noticed: every year, the season of Lent begins and ends with Jesus being tempted by the devil. It's like a pair of bookends framing the whole season of Lent; this gives a clue about Lent is for. This year, we have Luke's version of the story. At the very end of Lent – on Good Friday – we have the story of Jesus agonizing in the Garden as he is tempted to let the cup of suffering and death pass him by.

It has been suggested that the three temptations put forth by Satan were tests that Jesus had to face and overcome all during his earthly ministry, not just on this one occasion. It's also been suggested that they're the same temptations that plague us throughout our lives. How *Jesus* responds to them suggests how *we too* might respond.

The first temptation: "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." The first temptation is to change a rock into bread, or, as one commentator put it: "to change a rock into a roll." Bread is the staff of life, the symbol of bare physical existence. (Interesting that we use the word *bread* for *money*.) We are told that the first

thing people need is food, then shelter – and only then can they think of niceties like love and God. So the devil begins here – life, at its most basic level. In effect he says: “Jesus, you gotta eat; you’re hungry; you’ve been fasting forty days and nights. Use your divine power: satisfy your needs and your wants. You can do it.”

This is the temptation to use things for personal gain; it’s the temptation of materialism: “Be good to yourself; you’ve worked hard; you deserve that bigger house, that new car, that summer cottage, that expensive dress or suit, that Rolex watch, that Caribbean cruise, that destination wedding.”

Mind you: Jesus doesn’t condemn any of those things – **unless** they keep us from hearing God’s word and being faithful to it; then they become evil. If we choose them over God’s word, we fail the test, we cave in to the temptation. “One does not live on bread alone.” Jesus does not deny his hunger or his humanity. He simply says: “First things first. There’s more to life than bread.” What things do we put before the word of God?

Jesus chose to continue to fast and to pray, so that he could feed the hungers of others.

The second temptation: “All this – all the kingdoms of the earth – will be yours, if you worship me.” This is the temptation to power, the temptation to control, the temptation to make yourself the center of the universe. Just imagine what you could do if you owned all the kingdoms of the earth, or even just the kingdom where you live: the

kingdom of your home, the kingdom of your community, the kingdom of your school, the kingdom of your church. Imagine what it would be like to have everyone serving you and your desires: your parents, your family, your teachers, your co-workers, your business associates.

Mind you: Jesus doesn't condemn any of these positions of authority and control – **unless** they get in the way of serving God. We need parents and teachers and mayors and bosses and presidents. But if we place them or ourselves above our God, we fail the test, we cave in to the temptation; we worship someone other than God. Jesus says: "First things first." "You shall worship the Lord, your God, and him alone shall you serve." Who do we worship and serve, and who do we demand serve us?

Jesus chose to keep his faith in God, to worship and serve God alone.

The third temptation: "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here."

This is the temptation to put God to the test. Satan says to Jesus: "Prove you are who you say you are – by testing God to see if God really *will* save you."

How often we put God to the test: How can a God who is supposed to be all-good allow the innocent to suffer? How can he let someone so young and vigorous be afflicted with a terminal illness? How can he allow so many wars in the world? How can he stand by and allow so much injustice in the world? Why doesn't he answer our prayers?

Mind you: Jesus doesn't object to prayers of petition – **unless** we are putting God to the test. Who are we to put God to the test? – we mere humans, who know nothing when we compare ourselves to God? – we finite creatures, who cannot even begin to fathom the immensity and infinity of the Divine? If we put God to the test, we cave in to the temptation: we put ourselves above God. Jesus says: "First things first." "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." God is first, and above, and before all else. When are we tempted to test God's love for us?

Jesus chose not to *test* God's love because he was *certain* of it.

The First Sunday of Lent always begins with temptation. It's true for Jesus; it's true for us. It invites and challenges us, during this season of Lent, to look at our own temptations, to get our priorities in the right order, to look to God for the only power strong enough to withstand their force.

We've all seen pictures of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*. The story is told that when he began his painting he looked for someone to serve as his model for Jesus. After searching for a long time for just the right person, he finally located a chorister in one of the churches of Rome; the young man was a man of character and fine features; his name was Pietro Bandinelli. Years passed as da Vinci continued to work on his painting. Finally, all the disciples had been painted except one – Judas Iscariot. So da Vinci started looking for a man to serve as the model for Judas – a man whose face was hardened and distorted by sin; at least he came upon a beggar on the streets of Rome, with a face so villainous that da Vinci shuddered when he looked at him. He hired the man to sit for him as he painted the face of Judas on his canvas. When he was finished and about to dismiss the man, da Vinci said: "I have not yet found out your name." "I am Pietro Bandinelli," the man said; "I also sat for you as your model of Christ."

Very likely not a true story, but it teaches so clearly the implications of caving in, when we face temptation.