

The Temptation of Christ - the On-going Cosmic Conflict

Gospel according to Saint Matthew 4:1-11

At that time Jesus was led by the spirit into the desert, to be tempted by the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterwards he was hungry. And the tempter coming said to him: If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. Who answered and said: It is written, Not in bread alone doth man live, but in every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God. Then the devil took him up into the holy city, and set him upon the pinnacle of the temple, And said to him: If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down, for it is written: That he hath given his angels charge over thee, and in their hands shall they bear thee up, lest perhaps thou dash thy foot against a stone.

Jesus said to him: It is written again: Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. Again the devil took him up into a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them, And said to him: All these will I give thee, if falling down thou wilt adore me. Then Jesus saith to him: Begone, Satan: for it is written, The Lord thy God shalt thou adore, and him only shalt thou serve. Then the devil left him; and behold angels came and ministered to him. Thus ends the Holy Gospel.

First Sunday in Lent: Homily by Father Charles Jeremiah Higgins based on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew 4:1-11, Latin Tridentine Mass, Mary Immaculate of Lourdes Parish, Newton, Massachusetts; March 10, 2019

First Sunday in Lent

I take for my text from Psalm 90, which is the Psalm whose verses fill our Mass Propers today. The Psalm is the motif if you will of this First Sunday in Lent.

"He that dwelleth in the aid of the most High, shall abide under the protection of the God of Heaven. He shall say to the Lord: Thou art my protector, and my refuge: my God, in him will I trust. For he hath delivered me from the snare of the hunters: and from the sharp word."

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Ash Wednesday provides a dramatic opener for the Holy Fast of Lent and the three days following gives us exhortations on the right way of carrying out a fast that is pleasing to God.

And now on this First Sunday in Lent the intensity increases as we are brought to the frontlines of spiritual warfare. In the temptation of Christ we have an image which enables us to see that which is otherwise unseen, that is the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan. Christian revelation has given us a clear outline of both the existence and nature of this conflict. But, absent such revelation, we humans would never have figured it out.

You see, we are not the heroes of this story we are more the bit players. There is the Holy Trinity of God and there is the Satan, the adversary. The evil one who is now the Satan was once good, the angel of light created by God along with all the other pure spiritual creatures we call angels. But instead of loving God, his Creator, this angel thought instead to become his own god. The motto of Satan is: "Non serviam" (I will not serve). An English Puritan poet, John Milton, in his epic poem, "Paradise Lost" has the same reasoning, it was better to rule in Hell than to serve in Heaven.

For his rebellion Satan was cast down into Hell eternally, separated from God together with all of the other angels who followed him? The fall of the angels would not have concerned us if the Satan had not succeeded in tempting Adam and Eve, the first parents of the human race, into imitating him in his rebellion against God by disobeying the clear command of God and eating of the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Why did God allow such a temptation to take place at all? That is part of the mystery of inequity - we don't really know the answer to that question. We can speculate that God owed it to his justice to allow, and then once the Satan had succeeded God also in his justice had to concede to the devil Satan a certain right of conquest over the earth.

Therefore, God became incarnate in Jesus Christ in order to overturn this right of conquest. Jesus Christ, the second Adam, undoes by His obedient suffering what the first Adam had done by his disobedience. Christ utter self-emptied on the Cross vanquishes Satan's power. This is what the liturgy is continually showing us. The evil one is beaten once and for all times.

What is left during this last stage of the world before the second advent is that Satan is trying to make retaliatory strikes against Christ, his conqueror before he is shut up in Hell for good. The devil cannot block the whole human race from entering through the gates of Heaven. All he can do is pick off individual human souls who go astray and ferment as much human social strife as he can, particularly with wars.

But we little humans are just pawns in the game. We are nothing to Satan. We only matter to him because we are loved by God and precious to God. The devil like a true coward and bully goes after us because he can't overcome God, which ought to make us Christians think well on our existential situation.

If I keep faith with Christ in my baptismal vows, if I keep the moral commandments; if I strive to persevere in the church over the course of my lifetime, then Jesus Christ will protect me against Satan. I will be spared many things. I will be protected against many things. And at the end of my life I will die and go to Heaven. I may have to suffer in my sharing of the Cross, but I will not be a slave of Satan who is a most cruel slave master.

On the other hand, if I, as a baptized Christian choose to disbelieve what God has revealed to us about the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan, or if I become indifferent to this dangerous spiritual reality, or flipant in its regard, then I will NOT be protected and my own individual salvation will be very much at risk.

So then let us take to heart the lesson Mother Church gives us on this First Sunday in Lent about the true nature of the underlying conflict in the world. Let us neither under estimate nor exaggerate the threat Satan poses to us. The protection promised to Christ, mystically are the words of Psalm 90, his promise to us his faithful ones, as well.

"The Lord will overshadow thee with his shoulders and under his wings thou shall trust. His truth shall compass thee with a shield."

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Psalm 90

Qui habitat. The just is secure under the protection of God.

He that dwelleth in the aid of the most High, shall abide under the protection of the God of Heaven. He shall say to the Lord: Thou art my protector, and my refuge: my God, in him will I trust. For he hath delivered me from the snare of the hunters: and from the sharp word. He will overshadow thee with his shoulders: and under his wings thou shalt trust. His truth shall compass thee with a shield: thou shalt not be afraid of the terror of the night. Of the arrow that flieth in the day, of the business that walketh about in the dark: of invasion, or of the noonday devil. A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand: but it shall not come nigh thee. But thou shalt consider with thy eyes: and shalt see the reward of the wicked. Because thou, O Lord, art my hope: thou hast made the most High thy refuge.

There shall no evil come to thee: nor shall the scourge come near thy dwelling. For he hath given his angels charge over thee; to keep thee in all thy ways. In their hands they shall bear thee up: lest thou dash thy foot against a stone. Thou shalt walk upon the asp and the basilisk: and thou shalt trample under foot the lion and the dragon.

Because he hoped in me I will deliver him: I will protect him because he hath known my name. He shall cry to me, and I will hear him: I am with him in tribulation, I will deliver him, and I will glorify him. I will fill him with length of days; and I will shew him my salvation.

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