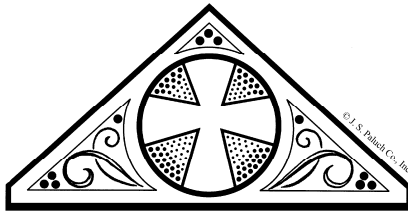


1ST SUNDAY OF LENT A—2008 FEBRUARY 10, 2008

FR. JOE SOBIERAJSKI, S.J.

GENESIS 2:7-9; 3:1-7 ROMANS 5:12-19

MATTHEW 4:1-11



“The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve.”— *Matthew 4:10*

The face of evil, that is the face of the devil as we have it portrayed in western art, partakes of the monstrous. In the Last Judgment scenes that span the doorways of Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals or even in the paintings of the early Italian renaissance, the devil is often portrayed as half animal and half human with distorted and grotesque features. Visually powerful, these images were meant to encourage a fear and disgust in the viewer so that they might avoid the sins in their lives that would make them subject to this fearful figure for all of eternity. These faces of evil, however, are what are seen after our evil has been done, and the time for repentance has past.

It seems to me; however, the face that evil puts on for us at the time of temptation is any thing but repulsive or monstrous. Except, perhaps, for the most hardened of sinners, the face that evil puts on seems by necessity to be one that is inviting, sincere, and beautiful. When we read about the sin of Adam and even in *Genesis*, I suspect that most of us see the serpent with our own sense of repulsion for snakes, making them as dangerous and therefore frightening creatures. But, that image takes on all of the connotations we associate both with the devil and with snakes. If we look at the temptation scene as it is pictured by Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel, I think we come to something that is nearer the truth of what most of us experience when we are tempted to commit serious sin. Because of the ceiling’s recent cleaning, the serpent has been revealed as a beautiful creation. Instead of a dark shadowy beast the surface of the serpent’s skin can now be seen as glistening, iridescent colors of green, yellow, and vermillion like a richly textured “shot” silk. Moreover, Michelangelo has given the serpent the upper body and face of a beautiful blonde woman. The serpent seems too beautiful to offer anything that might be dangerous, and so Eve and Adam seem easily taken in.

As we look and listen to that First Reading this morning, we can understand just how beguiling the serpent was and still is. Not only does the serpent assure Eve that she will not die, but he holds out this great good that will come from eating the fruit, “the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know what is good and what is evil.” And so, Adam and Eve see the fruit as “good,” as “pleasing,” and as “desirable.” But more importantly they completely lose sight of the fact that God has told them not to eat of the fruit of the tree and ignore God’s warning that they will die.

And so, from the very beginning of our human history, we are locked in a struggle, all of us, between life and death, between the eternal and the temporal. Since this is our experience, it was also Jesus’ experience as He is led into the desert by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit does this we are told so that

Jesus might be tempted by the devil. Here immediately after He has received the Father's approval at His baptism, and before He actually begins to proclaim the Good News, He enters into an experience that will establish His enmity that will end only at His Resurrection.

Jesus has been in the desert for forty days and forty nights, and undoubtedly His audience would have seen the parallel here with their own ancestors who spent forty years in the Sinai. Matthew then structures His temptations on those experienced by the Israelites during those forty years. He also makes all Jesus' responses quotations from the Book of Deuteronomy which was written by Moses and summarizes the experiences of the Chosen People during their time in the desert. Contrary to the actions of the Israelites, Jesus does not give into the temptations. The tempter first addresses the hungry Jesus with, "If You are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread." Although they were freed from the slavery of Egypt the Israelites showed little thanks, and in fact they seemed satisfied with nothing. Their first complaint was about the lack of food as they longed for the fleshpots of Egypt. Yahweh sent them manna and quail, and then of course they complained about the lack of variety in their diet. After forty days of fasting, however, Jesus neither complains nor does He fall and give into temptation of changing stones to bread. And responding from Deuteronomy He says, "Man does not live on bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Deut. 8-3) In the Old Testament, bread is a symbol for Yahweh's Word, and Jesus knows that the fulfillment of His Father's will is far more important than satisfying His hunger. Unlike the Chosen People, He chooses God over His won personal comfort.

Not one to accept defeat, the tempter again speaks: "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down...He will command His angels concerning You and with their hands they will support You, lest You dash Your foot against a stone." Even though Yahweh had freed them from slavery, given them food to eat and water from the rock, and showed His Love in every way, the Jews continued to test God, and demanded that He show them signs that would confirm their ever dwindling faith. On the height of the parapet of the temple, however, Jesus refuses to tempt the Father, or presume on His providential care. He will not use His power to perform marvelous acts for the wrong reasons. Convinced of the Father's Love, He again replies in words from Deuteronomy, "You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test." (Deut. 6:16)

Showing Him all the kingdoms of the world, the tempter says to Jesus, "All these I shall give You, if You will prostrate Yourself and worship me." In their desire for a more powerful and less demanding God, and inspired by the pantheon of gods worshiped by their pagan enemies, the Israelites fashion a Golden Calf from the golden jewelry, and trinkets, and worshiped it. Ironically they do so just at the very time that Moses is receiving the Tablets of the Law from Yahweh on Mt. Sinai. Jesus, however, is loyal to His Father and will not bow to satan and compromise His mission, and so again citing Deuteronomy Jesus again, "the Lord your God shall you worship and Him alone shall you serve."

Not only do these three temptations reflect those of the Jews in the desert, they also in a sense reverse the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden. The sin of Adam and Eve was their desire to become like God. In the desert, God as Jesus the Man overcomes humanities pretensions to divinity and chooses neither to abuse His identity as God's Son nor His mission of reconciliation for His own personal gain or pleasure.

Paul tells us in *Romans* today that "Just as through one person sin entered the world, and through sin, death...so through one righteous act acquittal and life came to all." Whoever has faith in Jesus Christ finds life transformed, for Christ has come to restore us human beings to the possibility of entering into communion with God.

There is a cheerful optimism here in Paul which we might not immediately associate with this Season of Lent. But, since we know this penitential Season ends with the glorious Resurrection of Christ we have every reason for optimism. With all that Christ did for us, we should understand that He continues to do for us. The graces of this Season are meant to encourage us as we face the temptations that assail us, perhaps not as dramatically as Christ's. Yet, with their promises of wealth, privilege, position and pleasure they attack us at our weakest points. They are the qualities, the characteristics of our society today, and as such they have "good" written all over them. Like the iridescent serpent on Michelangelo's ceiling, they seem too beautiful to be anything but good, and we can be easily seduced by their beauty. All of us have a point of vulnerability. *Where are you most vulnerable to temptation? How can you most easily be fooled?* We all have our weak points, and part of the grace of this Lenten Season is to help us face squarely and own those weaknesses for in knowing them, admitting them, and recognizing our need for the Lord's help to see them clearly, can provide us with the courage we need to say with the Lord, "Get away satan."