

First Sunday of Lent
March 10, 2019
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Reflection

In today's Gospel, we hear that Jesus "was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil." It's useful to consider the devil, since he opposes our salvation. We should try to forget the Hallows' Eve version with a red robe and pitchfork. And definitely forget the Saturday Night Live version who seems naughty, yet fun to be around. The devil is an angel; a fallen angel; a creature without a body, but with pure intellect and will. Upon creation, each angel made an immediate choice that he cannot change; choices for good or evil. They decided on a certain good: either the goodness of God or the goodness of something else. And they didn't make their choice based on passion; some fleeting desire. After all, they don't have bodies to sway them. Their choice became a habit they can never shake. The cookie monster wrestles with a bad habit. He knows that cookies aren't good for him. But his tummy says they're yummy so he wants the whole box. It's a tug of war between mind and body. But an angel doesn't have a body. The only thing he wants is what he has decided to be good: either God or something else. No other appetite can pull him away, so the choice is immediate and cannot be changed. An angel doesn't have a body, and doesn't have a brain.

¹ http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2016/10/how-to-go-to-hell_29.html, retrieved 9 Feb 2019.

Deut 26:4-10
Ps 91
Rom 10:8-13
Lk 4:1-13

We take time to figure things out, and change our minds when we realize we're wrong. An angel knows fully and instantly, but right or wrong will never change his mind.¹

Jesus is no angel. He is true God and true man. As God, he is creator and not creation. The heavenly host adores him, even as fallen angels try to destroy his work. As man, he chooses with a human will: to hunger and thirst, to suffer and serve, to heal and to love. He chooses to follow the divine will, with obedience to God the father. Full of the Holy Spirit, led by the Spirit, he goes to the wilderness to be tempted...and tested. The Greek word used by Luke has both meanings: *πειραζο* (pay RA zo) can mean tested by God to sharpen true character, or tempted by the devil to fail and sin.² The devil tries us, and God allows it. From the struggle comes strength.

Jesus faced three temptations. First came food. Jesus was hungry, but rejected the choice to turn a stone into bread. We join our fasting to his and gain self-control. Next came power. Jesus was offered authority over earthly kingdoms, but rejected it for service. We join our almsgiving to his and gain detachment from false needs. Finally came fame. He could fly from the Temple and reveal his glory, but rejected it.

² Concise Greek-English Dictionary.

He chose humble reliance on grace working miracles for others. We join our prayer to his, trusting in the power of his word: "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust."

Are these works necessary? Paul tells the Romans minimal conditions for salvation: "For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved." These are the critical choices, but we choose to do even more: fasting, almsgiving and prayer. I think they help us to believe and help us to confess. At the same time, we rejoice. St. John of the Cross tells the Christian "that by doing these works for the love of God he will gain eternal life."³ But it's a joy that is rooted in humility, since "the value of his good works...is not based upon the number or quality of them, but upon the love of God which inspires him to do them." St. Teresa of Calcutta puts it more simply: "Do small things with great love."

St. John of the Cross also challenges us. He recommends that we purge ourselves of "self-interest, joy, pleasure, consolation and praise" in regards to our works, both for now and the life to come. Desire that "God alone shall have joy in [your] good works and shall take secret pleasure therein." Not easy! But give him what you can, the first fruits, following the response given by Moses: "So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me."

Even better, and for this Eucharist, give all your merits to Mary. Her generosity cannot be outdone.⁴

³ St. John of the Cross, Ascent of Mount Carmel, 3.27.4-5.

⁴ Fr. Michael Gaitley, 33 Days to Morning Glory, Day 6.