

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER¹

The First Sunday in Lent

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fifth Verse of the seventeenth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.³

“Thus saith the LORD; Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the LORD. For he shall be like the heath in the desert, and shall not see when good cometh; but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, in a salt land and not inhabited. Blessed is the man that trusteth in the LORD, and whose hope the LORD is. For he shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river, and shall not see when heat cometh, but her leaf shall be green; and shall not be careful in the year of drought, neither shall cease from yielding fruit.

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? I the LORD search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings. As the partridge sitteth on eggs, and hatcheth them not; so he that getteth riches, and not by right, shall leave them in the midst of his days, and at his end shall be a fool.

“A glorious high throne from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary. O LORD, the hope of Israel, all that forsake thee shall be ashamed, and they that depart from me shall be written in the earth, because they have forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living waters. Heal me, O LORD, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved: for thou art my praise.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the tenth Chapter of the First Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians.⁴

“Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea;

And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; And did all eat the same spiritual meat; And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ. But with many of them God was not well pleased: for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand. Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come. Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall. There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his arm, whose heart turns away from the LORD. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.”⁵ In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Development:

The Gospel for today⁶ recounts the story of Our Lord’s three temptations by the devil, starting with Satan’s suggestion that He should relieve His hunger by turning stones to bread, followed by the dare to throw Himself off the pinnacles of the Temple so that God’s angels would catch Him and lift Him up, ending with the promise of power

over all the kingdoms of the world, if only Our Lord would fall down and worship the devil.

While Jesus withstood each of these temptations, and rebutted Satan's suggestions with appropriate quotations from Scripture, each of us can readily feel the great drawing power of these taunts and dares. Assuredly, most of us would not have had the hardihood to turn down one or two of these offers, let alone all three of them. Thus it comes as no surprise that the set of lessons for the Daily Office today, which I just read you, likewise focuses on the subject of temptations. And temptations are an extraordinarily appropriate subject for our consideration on this First Sunday in Lent.

In today's First Lesson, Jeremiah warns the ancient Hebrews, and therefore warns us, against the temptation to trust in ourselves and our own powers—which he depicts with the image of the strength of our arms—rather than to trust in God and in God's powers. This self-trust is futile, the prophet tells us, using the image of the heath, a flowering plant that grows in moderately hydrated land and which, if transplanted into the desert, will wither away. Jeremiah's suggestion seems to be that, against all the manifold ills of life, we will find our own unaided strength to be of no more avail than the heath plant's strength avails it in the arid wastes.

Saint Paul makes a similar point, when he reminds the Corinthians of the first Hebrews' sad performances during the Exodus from Egypt. Repeatedly, they were led to forget the great care God had taken for them and the mighty works He did to save them from bondage and, in that forgetfulness, they turned aside from worshipping Him to follow pagan gods; time after time, they lapsed into distrust of Him and so fell into despair and hopelessness; and all too often they let themselves assume that the good things they experienced were the results of their own powers and skills rather than of God's bounty towards them.

St. Paul ends these reminders by describing these errors as the results of temptations. And so they were: just as God was trying to teach and strengthen the Israelites so they could become His people, the devil

was trying to dishearten them and mislead them, so as to erode their bond with God.

And that is the first important feature of temptation of which we need to be aware: temptation always seeks to lead us away from God, not toward Him. Temptation is, at bottom, always the temptation to sin and sin is, in its very nature, separation from God.

The second important feature of temptation is that it always plays upon some appetite or emotion that is natural to us as human beings. We are spiritual and mental beings who live in physical bodies, so we are richly provided with enticing opportunities for interesting, seemingly fulfilling, and pleasurable distractions. Some of these distractions work upon our minds, some upon our emotions, and some upon our bodies, but all of them share the characteristic of being subtle; that is, they operate in ways that tend to conceal from us what is really going on when they influence us.

As just one example of this process, think of those ancient Israelites in the desert, when they grumbled against God and God's appointed leader, Moses. They complained that they were hungry and thirsty and they said they would have been better off had they stayed in Egypt, where as slaves they were fed so they could work for their masters.

Now our bodies do need water and they do need to eat. So the Hebrews' physical discomforts were natural and understandable, and that was the starting point for their temptation. For there is no evidence that they were in danger of dehydration or starvation to the point of illness, they were merely uncomfortable. It was not that they did not have as much water or food as they needed, it was that they did not have as much water or food as they would have *liked* to have had, or, even more likely, as they thought they deserved to have.

So the devil was able to take this very natural desire and use it to distract the Israelites' attention from the real issue—which was what God was doing for them, and the way He had provided them with their real necessities every step of the way on their flight from captivity to

freedom—and was able to use that distraction to redirect their attention to something much less important: to their discomfort or dissatisfaction over their lack of comforts.

That, in turn, lead to complaining and grumbling, in fact, to disloyalty and resentment, which bred ingratitude and disrespect. And by the time they had reached this stage, they were well on their way to effectively separating themselves from God, the same God Who had not only freed them from Pharoah's [FAY-roze] yoke but Who had, in fact, given them water by making springs pour from the rocks and Who had fed them by making birds and *manna* fall from the skies to feed them.

This is the basic mechanism of temptation. It always begins in something natural, something inborn within us. The object of any temptation initially appears to be both right and proper and, in fact, to be something we are accustomed to, if not actually to be entitled to.

Then that lack preys upon our minds, creating dissatisfaction, then resentment, then anger. Finally, we are convinced that we are suffering deprivation when, in truth, we are almost always suffering no more than inconvenience or delay. But temptation works on our sense of our own personal importance and, in this way, tends to blind us to the adverse but impersonal forces of circumstance and also to the legitimate and competing needs of other people.

Notice that element of pride at work in the three temptations Satan put before Our Lord in today's Gospel, to which we have already referred. First, there was the temptation for Him to demonstrate His control over the physical forces of this world. Then there was the temptation to show off His divinity and His importance to God the Father. And, finally, there was the temptation to exercise power over all other human creatures instead of leading them by gentle, humble example.

Conclusion:

Almost always, the most effective temptations play, in some way, upon our innate sense of our own importance. Sometimes it is the feel-

ing of entitlement that I have just described; sometimes it is the feeling that we are special in a fashion that makes certain rules or restrictions, or obligations, not as binding on us as they may be on other people.

But properly looked at, most effective temptations contain at least some elements of this sort of self-love or self-importance, elements that are best described as *pride*. And pride, you should remember, is one of those errors that are so seductive and so important that the Church has traditionally included it in that handy little list of moral traps that we call “the Seven Deadly Sins”.

So when we are tempted, we must always remember what St. Paul told the Corinthians: “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”⁷

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister JD⁸
March 9, 2014.

¹ “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” *Concerning the Service of the Church*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xvii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ Jeremiah 17:5-14 (KJV).

⁴ I Corinthians 10:1-13 (KJV).

⁵ Jeremiah 17:5b-6a (RSV).

⁶ St. Matthew 4:1-11.

⁷ I Corinthians 10:13 (RSV).

⁸ Priest-in-Charge, Holy Angels Anglican Catholic Mission, Picayune, MS; Supply Priest, Christ Church Anglican Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Metairie, LA; Honorary Canon, the Diocese of the Resurrection, and Honorary Canon and Canon to the Ordinary, The Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church.