

The Inclusive Community

First Sunday of Lent

February 21, 2010

Temptation and Triumph

Luke 4: 1-13

Homily of Rev. Dr. Anthony T. Padovano

I would like to reflect with you on the temptations in the desert by considering two themes.

1. Conflict and Trust

There are a number of times in the Gospel tradition when Jesus is portrayed as having conflicts, not just with others, but with himself. His life journey is not easy and, at times, he seems uncertain.

He is tempted in the desert because he is not sure. The temptations are about an easy way to settle the conflicts he experiences. He can end the fasting by asking God to disregard the humanity of Jesus by giving him instant bread miraculously. Jesus instead decides to work through his humanity trusting that God will sustain him. He does not want to be an idol but a human being. This means conflict, hesitation, times when his mind is distracted and his spirit famished. He will not ask God to become a magician and do miracles but to help him quietly to settle into his own humanity.

Adam and Eve, in the Garden, rejected their humanity by trying to become God, knowing all, never dying. Jesus, in the desert, wants to be a human being with all the conflicts, false starts, confusion, mistakes, regrets and sorrows.

The second temptation deals with what Jesus will do with the advantages his celebrity and charisma will give him. Will he try to create his own kingdom, his own empire, his own rule of law? This is what failed Messiahs and narcissistic preachers do. Jesus again opts for his humanity. He will not become God by making himself the center of attention. He will direct his gifts and talents to the larger meaning of the universe and of God. He will keep his humanity focused on the fact that he does not have all the answers or control all the circumstances. He will trust God to take him where he needs to go. He will let his human journey become just that, a human journey.

2. Temple and Cross

Luke changes the order of temptations from Matthew's earlier Gospel. It is important for Luke that the third temptation take place in Jerusalem and on the pinnacle of the Temple. Matthew makes that the second temptation. Why does Luke do this?

Luke loves symmetry. His Gospel is a series of balanced items. Here, on the Temple, in Jerusalem, Jesus is facing Calvary where he will die.

The third temptation is about Jesus being rescued by God in a miraculous flash of divine power. If he throws himself from the roof of the Temple, God will take away all the pain. Angels will protect him. His humanity will not do this. He will not even dash his foot against a stone. Then, perhaps, if this does not work, he will die an easier death, by a fall from the Temple. There will be no need to live through a troublesome, heart-breaking, eventually tragic human journey.

Go ahead, Jesus, the devil taunts and coaxes. One leap and you will die an easier death or stage a stunning miracle. In both cases, you will overcome all the problems of being a human being.

Jesus dismisses the devil by declaring that this is not what God wants of us, suicide or a life of miracles. God wants us to be human.

As Jesus faces Calvary, Luke comments that the devil left him until a better moment, on Calvary, a year later.

At the end of Luke's Gospel, Jesus is dying. He says, only in Luke, three words that are deeply human. He prays that his executioner be forgiven, not destroyed by God but forgiven. He sees the pain of a thief on a nearby cross and asks him to do what Jesus will do, hope against hope that God will bring both of them to Paradise. And, finally, Jesus says, in a powerful last line: God, I always trusted you and I will do so now by commending my spirit into your hands. Do not let go of me but bring me home.

The three temptations and the three words-- the Temple and the cross – two matching symbols. The Temple will not be the center for the disciples of Jesus. The cross and the Jerusalem resurrection will be. The tomb of Jesus and Calvary are close to each other. One could see them from the pinnacle of the Temple. God will rescue Jesus in the end, not with an easy rescue as he floats down from the Temple and has not even his foot injured. God will rescue Jesus only when the full human journey is done, with all the wounds and crushing defeats, with all the glory and despair, with all the steps taken and all the roads travelled. Resurrection will not be a miracle but the ordinary way God will deal with all of us if we never give up on our humanity and leave the future to God.

God wanted a son, not an angel. But sons are human. They have hearts that can be broken and lives that come to an end. In the desert, Jesus chose to be one of us, human, conflicted and in pain, fasting and alone, isolated and uncertain. On the cross he will still

be there. He makes a wild act of hope at the end that Paradise will be his and that there is a God to receive his spirit.

Jesus lives and dies the way we do. This is Luke's message. There are no easy certitudes and painless solutions. We never get beyond the conflicts. We do not live by never having our foot dashed against a stone. Sometimes our feet are nailed to a cross and we get, not bread in the desert but sour wine on the cross in the late afternoon of the last day of our lives.

The glory of God is not a miracle. The glory of God is a human life, well lived, never easy, always worth it. The glory of God is a human being fully alive. That is all Easter is. And that is enough.