

OUR LADY STAR OF THE SEA, WEYMOUTH

HOMILY FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT (B)

1st MARCH 2009

We have begun Lent and received our Lenten programme. My first thought as I read it was why should we do all these things?

It's demanding.

It could be seen as an opportunity for spiritual heroics, keeping Lent like using a religious gym.

This cannot be right. It would focus all the attention on me and how good I become at ticking the boxes. I might even be tempted to compare myself with others and feel superior if I am doing better.

I said "tempted". There's a clue.

Lent is dominated by the image of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness.

The prayer of the Church starts every day in Lent with the antiphon: Christ the Lord was tempted and suffered for us.

So keeping Lent is clearly connected with temptation. If we can find out more about our Lord's temptation we should be able to understand the purpose of Lent for ourselves.

St. Mark's account of the temptation of Jesus is very brief – no details. Our reading even omits the first phrase – immediately afterwards. The temptation of Jesus began immediately after his baptism of when the Holy Spirit descended on him and his Father spoke to him.

Temptation is linked with baptism.

Before baptism there is no temptation, after baptism there is.

So temptation is a challenge to our baptism.

At his baptism God the Father had said to Jesus: You are my beloved Son, I am well pleased with you. In his temptation Jesus was challenged to do whatever was displeasing to God. At our baptism we made promises or promises were made for us and we confirmed them at our confirmation.

Our temptation is to break our baptismal promises.

During Lent we have to check our baptismal promises and protect them.

Anything that involves a watering down or a compromise with our baptismal promises is a temptation.

Let's remind ourselves of what we promised.

To reject Satan and all his works and all his empty promises.

This sounds familiar. That's exactly what Jesus had to do.

He was tempted by Satan. Who or what is Satan?

Our Catechism describes Satan as "a seductive voice, opposed to God"

Seductive voices by definition invite us to do whatever will give us the greatest pleasure. Our greatest pleasure might cause harm to ourselves and to others in the long-term if not immediately. During Lent we might perhaps examine our pleasures and check whether or not they are pleasing to God.

What is pleasing to God?

Jesus pleased God by being completely what God wanted him to be, the image of his Father. We will please God by being completely what he wants us to be. That means to be as close to Jesus as we possibly can be through prayer, the sacraments and spiritual reading.

If we aim to live closer to God through our Lord Jesus we will examine our pleasures. If we love as Jesus loved and live as he lived, if we share his values and visions, some of those things which promise pleasure will turn out to be empty pleasures.

They will disappoint. Pleasures that disappoint are those that we give up, not just for Lent but for ever. Conversely, pleasures that last into eternity are gifts from God to be recognised and appreciated.

Lent is hard.

It was for Jesus. The wilderness is the harshest of environments, a place of emptiness. Jesus went straight from an experience of unity with God at his baptism to a place of separation from God in the wilderness.

This represents the highs and lows of the spiritual life. One moment we feel close to God, the next we feel distant from God like Jesus in the wilderness, closer to Satan than to God. At such times we are most vulnerable to temptation.

The wilderness is a harsh and lonely place. There were wild beasts there, but the angels looked after Jesus, so we may expect them to look after us.

So let's pray that we may use our Lenten programme to check for anything that weakens and compromises our baptismal promises and to recognise and reject all empty promises.

Our Lord resisted temptation successfully. He knows what it's like and what it takes. He will help us if we ask. Then at Easter "with conscience by the world unstained" we will "praise his name for victory gained".

Rev Geoff Carey