

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT - YEAR A

10 FEBRUARY 2008

First Reading: Gn 2:7-9, 3:1-7

Second Reading: Rom 5:2-19 or 5:12. 17-19

Gospel: Mt 41:1-11

RESIST TEMPTATIONS LIKE JESUS DID

As we all know, every person in Zambia must carry an identification card, a “Reg” with proper details of name, age, residence, citizenship, photo, etc. This “Reg” can be asked for at any time by police and other government officials. Yes, all of us we must know what our identity is!

Well, my sisters and brothers, this Season of Lent that we are now beginning is a time for all of us Christians to check out our real identity. It’s a time for us to renew our Baptismal commitment to follow Jesus Christ more faithfully and diligently. Unless we carry around with us our Baptismal certificate (which we surely don’t do!), the only way people will know that we really are Christians is by our actions. Not just our words, since it’s easy to say all the right things if we want to! But by our actions, the deeds that show what is truly deep down in our heart.

That is why it is important for every one of us Christians here in Zambia to take a good hard look at how closely our life – words and deeds – follow the example of Jesus Christ. To be a Christian is to have the identity of one who is a follower of Jesus. So we need to know how Jesus lived his life, how he went about his mission of proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven,

The Lenten Season, the forty days before we celebrate the great feast of Easter, is a wonderful time to look at Jesus and to evaluate our own identification with him. Indeed, this first Sunday of Lent helps us know Jesus better because of the very powerful story told in the Gospel according to Matthew. It is the story of the temptations that Jesus experienced during his ministry of sharing the Good News. The devil tried to distract Jesus from his true identity as the Son of God. And the devil still tries to distract each one of us from being a true daughter or son of God today!

Before we look at the Gospel, let’s remind ourselves of that sad story of the first great temptation reported in the Bible, the fall of our original parents, Adam and Eve. The story has a great lesson for us. Our humanity, symbolized by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, is very good, very beautiful and very wise. But God alone is the source of that goodness, beauty and wisdom. Adam and Eve tried to play like they were God, pretending to be in control themselves of their own destiny, acting as if they could be the source of power over what would happen to themselves and to everything surrounding them.

Sometimes you and I might suffer the same delusion, failing to understand why we are created and what the real purpose in life is of all the good things we possess. You see this in a family, where one of the parents dominates all the rest of the family, always insisting that her or his way is the best way, not respecting the needs and desires of the others. Or you see it in a small Christian community, where some leader takes all words, all responsibilities, all privileges, to herself or himself. Or you see this in the world of politics, where some leaders think only of themselves and the way they can use power in their own selfish interest and in the interests of their party and tribe and family.

Well, let’s look at how Jesus faced the temptations in his life. The three temptations endured by Jesus in desert (and indeed, throughout his public ministry) show us how he chose to share the weakness of our humanity and how he overcame that weakness by relying on God as he goes to do his Father’s will. All three of the temptations by the devil were intended to draw Jesus away from the full trust that a true Son is expected to have in the Father and pull him away from the paths God is calling him to follow.

Let's try to interpret the temptations Jesus faced in his life and see how they line up with the temptations that each of us face. Remember what we read in the Scripture, that Jesus is fully human like you and me, and thus is "one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15).

The first temptation is for Jesus to break his forty day fast by changing stones into bread. Surely he was hungry, very hungry indeed! But he knew that relying on this miracle was not God's plan for him and hence he rejected the temptation! And how are we tempted? Not so much to go after the basics like bread and nsima, but maybe a lot of extra things that we really don't need. Fancy clothes, lavish food, extra beers, maybe two or three cell phones. The temptation to go for more and more is called "consumerism" and is urged by peer pressures among family and friends and pushed by advertisements. Sometimes money is wastefully spent, both by family heads and by political officials! But just as Jesus resisted his temptation, so can we, with God's good help!

In the second temptation, the devil wants Jesus to put on a big display by throwing himself off the tower of the Temple and letting angels grab him, winning the applause of all who watch such a spectacle. But that's really a temptation to be deceitful, pretending to trust in God but really just looking for glory! You and I might feel tempted that way when we look out for a big name, wanting people to admire us, even if we have to lie and cheat to get that glory. Isn't it true that in Zambia some members of political parties run for office by boasting of all the good things they can do and how much authority they have – but then they forget the people who voted for them? They are just telling lies! Let's be truthful like Jesus and reject the temptation to look after false glory.

The third temptation of Jesus touches something that can be very close to all of us – the desire to be powerful and influential over others. The devil promised Jesus that power if he would betray his trust and obedience for God his Father. Sometimes in small ways, maybe sometimes in big ways, we face temptations like that. Invited by the devil to go counter to the straight path of God's loving commandments, for example, in acting honestly in business, in being faithful in marriage, or in caring for those less fortunate than I am, I think I can have a very self-interested power that builds up my image and control at the expense of others. But we can have even greater authority and influence by following Jesus' example of putting God first!

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND SHARING IN SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

- Do I resist the temptation to spend a lot of money on many things that I do not much need?
- In my Christian community or my family, am I only happy when I am a leader?
- Do I care about those who are less fortunate than I am?

SKETCH

Have someone act as a well educated and rich person who is proud and boasts all the time about her or his achievements. Have another person who is equally educated and rich but humbly attributes all achievements to God alone. The proud person then loses the riches and comes to realise that everything is gift from God. From then on, she or he only relies on God.

COMMUNITY PRAYERS

- We pray, Lord, for the Spirit of humility in our service of you and our sisters and brothers; *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*
- We pray, Lord, for the grace to pray always and resist the many temptations we face in our daily lives. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*
- We pray, Lord, that you help us to seek the good of others by doing the works of justice and peace. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*