

First Sunday of Lent

The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert, and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan.

Mark 1, 12-15

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews assures us that, because Jesus was fully human, he struggled with the same kind of temptations as we do, and that, as a consequence, we have the consolation of knowing that in Jesus we will find mercy whenever temptation gets the better of us: "It is not as if we had a high priest who was incapable of feeling our weaknesses with us; but we have one who has been tempted in every way that we are, though he is without sin. Let us be confident, then, in approaching the throne of grace, that we shall have mercy from him and find grace when we are in need of help" (Hebrews 4, 15-15). In his typical, direct and unadorned fashion, Mark, in today's gospel-reading, states: "The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert, and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan" (Mark 1, 12). While Matthew and Luke elaborate on the various temptations Jesus endured, we know from our limited experience that an extended period in the isolation and loneliness of a desert forces us human beings to come face to face with who we are and with our deepest fears. Jesus would have had similar experiences. Moreover, Matthew and Luke tell us enough for us to conclude that Jesus had to deal with the extremely strong urges felt by all human beings - for power, position possessions, popularity and sexual gratification.



Along with the readings of Ash Wednesday, today's readings usher us into the season of Lent. We can get trapped easily into thinking that Lent is a time when we are expected to engage in penitential practices that are designed to make us feel miserable because of our human frailty. At least, that's a message we are sometimes given. Lent is a word that comes from Old English, meaning springtime. It really asks us if we are committed to a life-time of ongoing renewal, if we really believe in lifelong formation and development, if the focus of our lives is on giving ourselves in imitation of Jesus so that others might live with respect and dignity.

As I sat down last week and turned my thoughts to Lent 2021, I dug out of my files an article I came across in the late 1990s. It was written by Barbara Taylor and published in *The Christian Century* magazine. It traced some of the history of Lent in the Christian churches. When the world didn't end and Christ's second coming didn't occur as St Paul had predicted, Christians began lowering their expectations of God, and, indeed, of themselves. They started hanging wooden crosses in their homes and settling into routine, comfortable living, remembering their once passionate devotion to God in much the same way as they remembered the other enthusiasms of their youth. Gradually, Christians became devoted to their creature comforts: soft couches, flannel sheets, the Sunday leg of lamb roasted with rosemary. These things lulled them into feeling safe and cared for - if not by God, then by themselves. They decided that there was no contradiction between being comfortable and being Christian, and before long, it was difficult to distinguish them from the population at large. No longer did they distinguish themselves by their bold love for one another. Nor did they get arrested for championing the poor, the marginalised and the alienated. They just blended in, avoiding extremes and deciding to be nice instead of holy. And God moaned out loud! But then, someone suggested that it was time to reawaken them, and remembered that the Bible offered some clues about how to do that. Noah and his family had patiently endured rain for forty days and forty nights. Israel had spent forty years wandering in the wilderness and learning to trust God. Elijah spent forty days of fear in a cave, before he was able to hear the still, small voice of God on the same mountain as Moses had spent forty days listening to God frame the Law. And Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness, during which he endured temptation by the devil. In biblical tradition, forty days represented an extended period, not necessarily an exact number of days.

So now, we, the people of God commit ourselves to the challenge of reflecting on how authentically or otherwise we are living as self-proclaimed disciples of Jesus, of opening our eyes to whatever remains when we let go of many of the comforts to which we have become wedded. We commit ourselves as a Christian community to spending forty days of living more by the grace of God than by what we can provide for ourselves. Daring to sign up for that means letting go of the illusion that we are the ones in total control of our own lives. It means giving our attention to whatever personal spring-cleaning is needed in our lives, and engaging in some serious spiritual renewal. It's about readjusting the course of our lives.

In her article, Barbara Taylor used the metaphor of the pacifier or dummy parents often use to calm an upset baby. When we venture alone into extended wilderness, retreat or reflective time, we really do come face-to-face with who we are, what we are afraid of and what we depend on. It's then that we are tempted to reach for whatever we use to pacify and calm ourselves - eating, shopping, working overtime, blaming others, even fussing over others. When those dependencies are taken from us, we have a better chance of discovering what life is like with no comfort other than God. I am reminded of something that happened at an international meeting of my confreres when one of our leaders started to lament that many Brothers were becoming addicted to over-work. When he had concluded his lament, a much younger man rose to his feet and declared: "Everybody in this gathering has at least seven addictions!" He reduced the meeting to silence. Perhaps we might benefit from reflecting on Barbara Taylor's assertion: "The simple definition of an addiction is anything we use to fill the empty space inside ourselves that belongs to God alone." (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Settling for Less*, *The Christian Century*, February 1998, p169-170)

The wilderness for each of us will be different. It doesn't have to be a secluded, national-park or an isolated retreat house. It can be the quiet of our backyard garden or a room in the house when all the other occupants are away. Still, in the quiet of our reflection space, we can still be tempted: we can hear our inner voice telling us that we'll go bananas without our pacifiers, that we won't be our true selves without them or that, since God really loves us, we can do anything we like and skip useless reflections like this one. Alternatively, we can stop and consider if there is something to be gained from taking seriously Lent's invitation to reflect on the quality of our Christian commitment to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. While that commitment might call for some adjustments to our daily priorities or some relinquishing of the pacifiers on which we depend, it is ultimately about deciding who really is the one to whom we belong. And then, demonstrating that belongingness in the way we live and act and speak. My Lent be for all of us an adventure into renewing our Christian commitment.