

Fr. Roger J. Landry

“Entering into Jesus’ Five-Fold Mercy in the Year of Mercy”

Retreat for Lay People

Casa Maria Retreat House of the Sister Servants of the Eternal Word, Irondale, AL

First Sunday of Lent, Year C

February 14, 2016

Dt 26:4-10, Ps 91, Rom 10:8-13, Lk 4:1-13

MERCY IN THE DESERT

- Most people have no desire at all to go to the desert, certainly for no more than a brief visit. But with this morning’s frigid temperatures in Alabama, many of us would admit that the desert is looking a lot more appealing! At a spiritual level, however, we should always have a great love for the desert, because the desert is what helps us to understand the 40-day pilgrimage of Lent, in which we join and imitate Jesus in the desert and ponder the fruits of what he learned and experienced there upon his return. Every Lent, the same Holy Spirit whom St. Luke tells us led Jesus into the desert wants to guide us into the desert with him. Lent is meant to help us recapitulate Christ’s 40 days away from everything so that we, apart from distractions, can focus on who we are, on our relationship with God and others and, with Christ’s help, can confront and overcome the way that the devil seeks to distort those relations and that image. It’s a special opportunity for us in this Jubilee of Mercy to ponder God’s mercy, to reflect on how his stomach is churning with a desire to forgive us for all those times we may have deliberately or unconsciously consented to the temptations of the evil one, and how, as St. John Paul II gave witness, God, through his Divine Mercy, wants to put a limit upon all the evil that the devil seeks to wreak.
- To go into the desert, however, is increasingly difficult for people today. We’re so connected that if we are out of cell phone range we can easily feel totally lost. While the Lord is not calling us all physically to go to the Arabah, he is calling us to the state of the desert, removing ourselves from distractions, from the television, computer, radio, newspaper, and the various things that may be fine in themselves but crowd our lives with noise so that we can’t hear God and with clutter so that we can’t see God. That’s something that we have tried to do during these 40 hours of retreat, but it’s something that he’s asking us to do not just for a weekend but for the whole annual 40 day retreat we call Lent. The first temptation we face each Lent is to refuse to go into the desert with Christ, to think that our Lent can be complete if, for example, all we do is give up chocolate and potato chips. The first big hurdle is for us to hear Christ’s voice from the desert saying, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while” (Mk 6:31).
- The next lesson we need to grasp is what is supposed to be the fruit of that time in the desert, and that leads us to today’s Gospel. Today’s scene is particularly special, because the only way the evangelists would have known about it would have been if Christ had told it to his disciples himself. No one else was there. The Lord must have opened up his heart to them about this seminal moment in his hidden life, which occurred immediately after he was baptized in the Jordan by John the Baptist (Mk 1:12). The Holy Spirit led him into the huge fifteen-by-thirty-five mile desert between the mountain of Jerusalem and the Dead Sea so that he could pray to the Father about the public ministry that he was about to commence. He prayed and fasted for an incredible forty days, which obviously would have left him physically weak and famished. It was at this moment of physical weakness that the Devil came to him to tempt him. Much like God the Father had once allowed Job to be tested, the same Father allowed his Son to be tempted. In the temptations Jesus suffered and later described to his disciples, the devil brought out in a pristine form the types of temptation that Christ would undergo in his public ministry and that each of us undergoes in our lives. By focusing on how Christ responded, we, too, can learn how to receive his mercy so that we might be able to react as Jesus did.
- The first temptation was aimed right at Jesus’ tremendous hunger after 40 days of eating nothing: “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of Bread.” When the Israelites were in the desert, Satan successfully tempted them to grumble to God to feed them (Ex 16:3ff). Satan was tempting Jesus to recapitulate the Israelites’ lack of trust in God and Jesus would have nothing of it. Satan also was trying to tempt Jesus away from his mission and Jesus would have no part of that either. Jesus had come to save

people, to feed their most important hunger — the hunger of their souls — and Satan was trying to induce him, as Archbishop Sheen used to say, to become a baker rather than a Savior. To feed people's physical hunger would be a great way to win a crowd and become popular. As Jesus himself realized after feeding the five-thousand men with the multiplication of the five loaves and two fish, great crowds followed him, "not because [they] saw signs, but because [they] ate [their] fill of the loaves" (Jn 6:26). Hunger is the most basic human need and the devil was tempting Christ to bribe others to follow him. But Jesus himself was already living off a greater source of food and was preparing to train disciples to seek this same celestial nutrition: "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." This same insight he passed on to the crowds when they were following him to have their stomachs satiated: "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you" (Jn 6:27).

- All of us in the Church need to remember what this greatest food source of all is. There is no shortage of people who live by their stomachs alone. St. Paul says to the Philippians that there are many who are "enemies of the Cross of Christ" because their "god is their stomach" (Phil 3:19). The American people elected Herbert Hoover president in 1928 on his motto, "A chicken in every pot and a car in every garage." While the slogans have changed, often times we do not think much higher. The most important factor in most presidential elections still today — even among Catholic voters, as we see in exit polls — is the economy, who we think will put more money in our pockets and allow us to put more food on the table. The larger spiritual issues, about whether a candidate opposes the slaughter of unborn innocents or wants to celebrate it as a civil right, wants to defend marriage or weaken or redefine it, will set a good moral example or a bad one, often are pushed to the side. Even within the Church, sometimes Catholics will make all types of sacrifices to meet their own or others' material needs, but do very little to try to address their own or others' greater spiritual needs. Lent is the time Christ calls us all to resist that temptation and to seek first this heavenly food and live by it, trusting that, as he promised, everything else will be given to us besides (Mt 6:33). Over the course of this retreat, we have focused on how God mercifully always feeds our material and spiritual hungers, how he gives us each day our daily bread on our tables at home and his Son, the Living Bread come down from heaven, on this altar. We have also focused on the mercy of his teaching so that we may indeed live off of every word he gives us. Lent is the time in which we grow in our trust for God's providing, of his loving us more than the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, so that the devil is not able to tempt us by our tummies.
- In the second temptation, the devil presented Jesus with a vision of all the kingdoms of the world and said to him "To you I will give their glory and all this authority ... if you ... will worship me." Jesus was about to announce that his kingdom is at hand, but that kingdom was going to come about through humility and the Cross. The "father of lies" (Jn 8:44) was proposing a short cut, another way, an easier way. "I'll give it all to you if you fall down and worship me." The devil had gotten the Israelites in the desert to succumb to this temptation to worship him in a golden calf, rather than to trust in the God with whom Moses was speaking on the mountain. But he failed with Jesus, who said to him, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him alone.
- The devil likewise tempts us to compromise our relationship with God, with the truth, with the principles that flow from God, in order to get ahead or to get what we want. Often the devil disguises these temptations in terms of the pursuit of power, privilege, prestige or profit. He'll get candidates for political office to give in to the temptation to compromise the principles of faith in order to get elected or re-elected. He'll get students in school to cheat on exams to get a better grade. He'll get those who are gifted with the ability to speak well to use their eloquence and charm to manipulate and fleece people. He'll get those blessed with physical beauty to use their good looks to try to sleep their way to the top. He'll tempt those who have a job to put working and the money one can earn ahead of worshipping the Lord on the Lord's Day and building up a treasure in heaven. It is a perennial temptation to seek to achieve something worldly by compromising our relationship with God and his moral law, to serve the "ruler of this world" rather than the one, true God. Jesus told his disciples about this second struggle he faced so that we could learn from him that and how we are called to worship the Lord our God and serve him alone. And God in his mercy gives us the grace of conversion so that we might recognize our idols, and turn away from them to love the true God, serving him with all our mind, heart, soul and strength.

- In the third temptation, the devil tried to tempt Jesus to test God the Father. He even misused today's Responsorial Psalm to do so: "Throw yourself down from [this pinnacle], for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone' (cf. Ps 91)." The devil had succeeded in getting the Israelites to test God while they were in the desert. He got them to complain that Moses had brought them out into the desert to kill them and their children of thirst, and they were about ready to kill Moses. They said, "Is the Lord among us or not?" (Ex 17:1-7). Jesus didn't succumb to the same temptation. He replied, "It is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"
- This is the temptation to be presumptuous with God, to do things that will try to force God's hand. We try to coerce the Father into protecting us no matter what. By this temptation, the devil tries to get us to re-create our relationship with God on our terms rather than His terms; then, when God doesn't seem to respond to that situation because such behavior harms us, the devil uses it to divide us even further from God. Some of us can smoke a pack of cigarettes a day for several decades and then expect God to cure us of lung cancer simply because we ask him nicely in prayer. Some students can blow off their studies all semester and then expect God to help them get a good grade on their exams. We can all put ourselves repeatedly in a near occasion of sin and then expect God to save us from the consequences of the slippery slope into serious sin that results. Again and again the devil tries to tempt us to do something reckless and make us expect God to rescue us from it every time. Jesus passed onto his disciples his response to the devil's temptation, so that we could make it our own: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Rather than dig a hole and expect God to get us out of it, Jesus says, don't dig the hole. Rather than risk physical or spiritual injury and expect God to prevent the harm, Jesus says, don't take those reckless risks. Lent is a time in which we open ourselves up to God's mercy that prevents us from being presumptuous with him. It's a time for us to recognize that, if we haven't sinned, it's not because we've been personally stronger than the devil's temptations, but because God's mercy has made us withstand them or not even be confronted by them. Rather than presumptuously throwing ourselves down from precipices, Lent is a time in which we trustingly throw ourselves up into God's outstretched merciful arms.
- The last line of today's Gospel says that the Devil subjected Jesus to "every test" (v. 13), but Jesus never succumbed. In the letter to the Hebrews, we learn that "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet never sinned" (Heb 4:15). But Jesus is more than sympathetic. He went into the desert for 40 days to be tempted to show us the way to overcome temptations, by imitating him and his responses. Those 40 days were not just a time of tempting, but a time of mercy, so that through his sharing with his disciples what he underwent we could learn from him.
- But we have to get practical. How do we imitate and live Jesus' responses to the devil? How do we grow in strength against temptation? Jesus tells us in St. Mark's Gospel, that some devils are expunged "only by prayer and fasting" (Mk 9:29). That is why, every Lent, the Church, to strengthen us, presents before us the need for us to pray, to fast and to give of ourselves and what we have toward others. The devil seeks to trick us to disorder our relationship ourselves, to others, and to God and fasting, almsgiving, and prayer are the respective antidotes. The more we fast and place spiritual nourishment over material food, the less vulnerable we will be to be tempted by bread and other earthly pleasures. The more we sacrifice ourselves and our belongings for the good of others, the less prone we will be to giving in to the devil's seductions to give us power or control over others. The more we pray to God and seek to know and do his will in our lives the less assailable we will be to the devil's traps presumptuously to force God's hand. These three traditional practices of Lent are a great remedy, a merciful medicine, to the temptations of the Evil One, which is why the Church proposes them to us each year. And that's why we need to make bold resolutions in Lent with regard to all three.
- St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, wrote, "In order to be able to stand against the wiles of the devil, put on the whole armor of God." Prayer, fasting and almsgiving help us to do just that, because they help us to "put on Christ" (Rom 13:14), who himself prayed unceasingly, who fasted for 40 days, who gave himself until his last drop of blood. The discipline that Lent requires of us helps to keep us vigilant against the devil, by conforming us to Christ in faith. St. Peter instructed us, "Discipline yourselves and keep alert. The devil is prowling like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith." The devil

exists and he is real. He seeks to devour us. But Christ has overcome him and we will, too, provided that we put on God's armor, discipline ourselves as a disciple should, and remain vigilant. Lent is an annual spiritual desert boot camp the Church gives us so that we might train, yet again, to be victorious in this most important battle we'll ever fight.

- “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Jesus refused to change a stone into bread for the devil; but for us, his beloved flock, he is about to change bread into his own flesh and blood. He is the word that comes from the mouth of God and now that God wants to put that Word-made-flesh in our mouths. As we prepare to receive Jesus today, we ask him for the graces to live this 40 day calling us to “come with him apart from the crowds to a deserted place” in the most bold and holy way possible, so that we can experience the joy that comes from repentance, faith, and overflowing of his mercy, and become signs with him to the whole world that this is the time of fulfillment, this is the kairos of mercy, and the kingdom of God is at hand. As he comes into our presence today, let us ask him in his mercy for the grace of his mercy to “worship Him, the Lord our God, and serve Him alone.”