

First Sunday of Lent – 2022 C

Like most people, I suppose, my prayer life is fairly routine and God speaks in familiar ways. But Jesus still catches me by surprise at times. I vividly recall a cold and dark winter morning a few years ago, so comfortable in bed as the alarm went off. The day held a few things I did not really want to face and I groaned a little at the hours ahead. And then, like a flash, words clearly from Jesus came to my mind:

“Can you do this for love of Me?” Well, Lord, I admit that was nicely done! So I still groaned a bit, but the question got me up, and far more importantly, gave me purpose and direction, for love of Him.

Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Each of us has prayed those words hundreds or more likely thousands of times ... learned from Jesus Himself and passed on through generations of believers. Doing the will of God might sometimes involve extraordinary choices and decisive moments; but mostly it is the daily responsibilities and opportunities that make us disciples who seek to make things on earth as they are in heaven. In those ordinary routines, too, Jesus might ask the same: *“Can you do this for love of Me?”*

The temptations we recall each First Sunday of Lent remind us that Jesus, too, was tested; but they were only a prelude, as Luke forebodes, leading to ***that pivotal moment in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus stakes His very life on the prayer He Himself taught: “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by; yet not as I will, but as you will.”***

Ultimately, every temptation is some form of the same basic question: how can life be arranged to make me happy? Instead of looking outward to others in self-giving love, temptations turn us inward to pleasing the self. Jesus goes into the desert for forty days ... not to flee the *outer* world but to face the *inner* world

of the human soul and the challenge of our free will. While freedom is often invoked in our conversations today, the Gospel reminds us that freedom is not about doing whatever we want; it is the liberty to do what is right and good according to God. We accumulate information, science and technology, building upon the work and discoveries of those who preceded us. But freedom is different. Our freedom is always new, always uniquely personal. ***We must each choose the good, and we must choose it over and over if it is to take lasting root in us.*** This is the drama of temptation – for Christ in the desert, and for us each day, as the question echoes in our minds: “Can you do this for love of Me?”

Against the temptation to self-indulgence, symbolized here by bread but taking many different forms in our lives, Jesus sets fasting and self-denial, which makes us sensitive to the needs of others and enriches our spiritual lives in ways the things of the world simply cannot provide. Against the temptation to use our power to dominate and control others, Jesus sets works of mercy and charity – for it is in giving that we receive, and by serving others that we encounter joy. Against the temptation to test the limits God imposes, leaping from the temple and all the similar risks we take, Jesus sets trust of a deeper kind – the belief that when we say, Thy Will Be Done, obedience becomes our safest and wisest course.

In that lonely desert silence, the rebellion that began long centuries before in a lush Garden began to crumble. Genesis tells us that at the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, Adam and Eve hid from God, their trust and love turned to fear. Lent calls us from that fear into the courage that stands before this other Tree, the Tree of Life that is the Cross, and to learn from Jesus how to use our freedom wisely and well. This Lent, listen for those words: “Can you do this for love of Me?” With God’s help, we want to answer: ***“Thy Kingdom come, Thy Will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”***