Lent 3(2024)

**NOTES:** 1) Annual meeting?

*“Almighty God ..stretch forth the right hand of thy majesty, to be our defense against all our enemies.”* [Collect]

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 One might have noticed that the collects and Gospels in Lent have a lot to do with demons and temptation. Last week's Gospel about the Canaanite woman who begged Jesus to deliver her daughter from possession followed on the heels of Lent 1'sGospel of Satan himself tempting Jesus.

 As spirits, demons are able to get inside of us and learn our weaknesses to help design the "perfect" temptation. Most people struggle throughout their lives with one or more of the Seven deadly sins, especially **anger, envy**, and **pride**. But also **lust, greed**, and **gluttony** which I prefer to group under another emotion-- "joy"-- because they are engaged in for happiness. **Sloth**, or acedia, is the last and sort of unique because doesn’t appeal to 2251emotion, but involves just sitting on the sidelines, not involved, lazy, not **really** caring. In a sense pride undergirds each of the other six, but, that is for another time.

 The mid-20th Century stigmatist and mystic St. Padre Pio wrote to people, "we flee from suffering because we were made for paradise". Put another way, we were built for joy and **not** for pain. The explains also the appeal of luxury: we were made to have it easy; WE (Adam and Eve) wrecked things and made it **hard** for ourselves.

 Today we have yet another collect which draws attention to our inability to help ourselves. Last Sunday we prayed for help against all adversities which may assault our body or soul, because we have... no “power to help ourselves”. Throughout Lent we also have been remembering at all liturgies our need to lament our sins and acknowledge our **wretchedness**. On *Sexagesima,* even before Lent officially began, we acknowledged that we should not put our trust in anything that we do, but that we be defended by God from all adversity, a very similar prayer to today's.

 At this point we all should be feeling pretty incompetent! We can't do anything right! This is quite an assault to our **pride** in our own abilities, which of course is one of the aims of Lent since pride was what got us all into trouble in the first place way back with a certain apple. (As an aside, the Bible actually never mentions “apple”, just “fruit”, so it could have been a kumquat, although they aren’t as pretty.)

 Anyway, it **IS** important to realize and remember how easy it is to find ourselves suddenly careening towards serious trouble. Just as someone suddenly in the midst of a traffic accident, he might seconds earlier have been enjoying his favorite song on the radio; temptation just sneaks up on us. Upon reflection, this should NOT surprise us given that evil is cast throughout the Bible as a **predator** stalking.

 Just as last Sunday's Epistle to the Thessalonians admonished us not to be sexually immoral, or give into the “lust of concupiscence”, today's Epistle also talks about...lust and fornication. Such temptations often are easy to spot, even if they prove hard to resist. But, perhaps a tougher problem is mentioned in both our Epistle and Gospel: slander. St. Paul warned the Ephesians to not let anyone deceive them by “vain words”.

 Vain, as used in the Bible, is not a reference to looks, as we might say, “he or she is so vain”, someone who spends all his time in front of the bathroom mirror. Rather, vain is best translated as “empty”, like a breath...nothing of substance.

Those around Jesus today in our Gospel, as he cast out the demon, tried such an empty slur against him. They alleged that Jesus could cast out this demon because Jesus was in league with the prince of demons, the devil. (We see this all too often in politics today. When one can not defeat somebody with argument...just slander him.)

 Slander is just one form of vain words, but its impact is devastating. The human mind tends towards assuming the worst about people, and this is why people gossip. Slander sticks to people, especially if the slanderer is a respected person. We tend to think, “why, somebody like him would never lie?!” Slander always leaves a trace of doubt, just as a jury's “not guilty” verdict does. (A jury doesn’t find one **innocent**.)

 Now Jesus was able to refute the slander beautifully. He pointed out that **others** also cast out devils, and nobody complained about them! In other ancient, non Biblical, Judaic books we can read how Solomon in his great wisdom came up with all sorts of potions and cures for getting rid of demons.

 Jewish religious leaders back then assumed God's power was working through an exorcist to cast out a demon. Indeed, one of the very first episodes of the series *The Chosen* shows Nicodemus attempting to exorcize Mary Magdalene. The words recited were the very ones from the traditional Rite of Exorcism used in the Roman Church.

The superior power of Yahweh over Beelzebub was recognized by Jews in Jesus day and had so for a long time. So again, why should Jesus get accused when others had not?? Of course we know the answer, because Jesus was being called the Messiah.

 Jesus then pointed out that if the devil was working to undermine his very own troops, then the devil was slitting his own throat and soon would be defeated! This should not surprise us if we ever have watched any war movies. A traitor on one side usually spells sudden doom.

Notably not one of Jesus accusers stood ready to predict the imminent defeat of the devil which, again, would naturally flow from him working against his own side. This is not common in sports teams. When a team has internal conflicts it rarely performs well. (Remember the NY Yankees under Billy Martin.)

But certain other types of vain or empty words can be harder to disprove than even slander. They may be completely false and yet still lead many careening towards trouble. We see this today in political ads and debates where advocates of a position make an emotional appeal to listeners' fears. Fear makes us think irrationally and, as we all know, it is useless to argue with someone who is irrational.

 Vain words also can work by appealing to our pride. We all like to be told that we are smart or great at something. Our own feelings like being “complimented”.

Conversely, we do not like to be told that we “need improvement”. (Think of Report Cards and year-end reviews.) Knowledge that people instinctively want to assume the worst in **others** and the **best** in themselves has, in the Church itself, tragically led many pastors to avoid offending people and preaching **only** happy, uplifting, feel-good, sermons

 In this age of the expert, many today have been led by certified experts, such as theologians and psychologists with many letters after their names, into believing that traditional teachings of the Church have been wrongheaded from the start. This, of course, is a slander of the Church and its martyrs **who**, unlike modern psychologists and theologians (outside of a few such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer), who never have had to maintain their own beliefs through prison or torture.

It is also an appeal to human pride, namely, that we are smarter than everybody before us or...more **special**. The Gnostics of old and *The Da Vinci Code* of 20 years back are obvious examples of words which can sound very logically thought out, but which have led many astray from Christ.

 While such arguments may be very logical sounding, they contain their own human errors such as false assumptions or false dichotomies. (It only takes one false premise or assumption to be “off to the races”.) Yet, their success is again due to people's desire to believe the best and smartest in themselves and the worst in others by having, for example, discovered a way to “explain away” what the Church has taught.

 Nothing of course could make the devil happier. The effect of such vain words is not so much to defeat Christ, which no one including the devil can do, but...to remove the opposition. A traditional Christian may not have been moved from **opposing** something to **supporting** it, but instead to sitting on the sidelines—sloth--because he no longer is sure, like Pilate, “what is truth?” And so, why exert energy to fight to defend something which may not be correct after all??

 This is the point behind Jesus statement today in the Gospel that, “he who is not with me, is against me”. This quote is one of the so called “hard sayings” of Jesus. And naturally, it frequently is used by non-Christians to show that our faith is nonsensical since elsewhere Jesus also says, “he who is not against us, is with us”. They do seem to be inconsistent, but are not. The latter dealt with an exorcist who was not one of Jesus' disciples but **was** fighting evil by casting out demons.

 Just like the saying, “politics makes strange bedfellows”, in combat with the devil all fighters are allies. But, as Jesus was referencing **today**, when the devil is laying his traps to steal people away...nobody can sit on the sidelines. If one is not trying to stop the devil at every step, he becomes a prop which the dark-side can use to hide behind. Once something bad is in the offing, good people need to get on Jesus' side, and stay put.

 How can we know that we are being led astray...or hearing vain words? Certainly if something is so blatant, such as it goes against what we have been taught in and learned about in life, it will set off alarm bells just as the fire dept. does when a fire gets big enough to be seen.

 But, how can we stop ourselves from getting too far on the wrong path before we wake up at the cliff's edge? Usually time does not permit quiet reflection or consulting a “lifeline” to others who may know more. Usually though there is just time for a quick prayer anyway, "Lord guide me."

This is another reason why we should try to grow spiritually year-around, like deciding to get ourselves finally physically fitter. Spiritual growth improves our defenses, from our early warning system detecting another of Satan's fiery darts to fortifying our endurance for the inevitable wrestling matches.

 It is easy for us to be led astray by words which again can cause us to sit on the sidelines as great debates encircle us. We obviously can not fight everywhere, but we can choose some ditch somewhere to “hold until relieved”.

The 18th Century Irish statesman and opponent of the French Revolution, Edmund Burke, famously said: "the only thing necessary for evil to triumph, is for good people to do nothing”. There just is no sidelines in the battle with evil.

If somebody who has been an adversary ever before wants to hop onto our side for this one particular battle (once comfortable that he isn’t a Trojan horse), that is just fine. He **might** prove to be **just** what we prayed for: "God stretching forth the majesty of his right hand to be our defense against our enemies.” AMEN. +