

March 5, 2017 Bread and Circuses Homily: Brothers and sisters, one of the great literary figures of the early Christian era was a Roman poet, Juvenal, who was a pagan. A master of satire and criticism, he is perhaps best remembered for a phrase he coined regarding the elected leaders of his day. The memorable phrase is "bread and circuses". Juvenal poked fun at civic officials who enacted laws to secure and keep the votes of the poorer citizens by giving them cheap food and mindless entertainment. It was clearly diversionary in its objective. Give the masses what they want and not what they truly need: civic virtue, practical wisdom, and strong leadership from their leaders.

Traditionally, the first Sunday of Lent is known as "Temptation Sunday". In Matthew's account of Our Lord's temptations in the desert, Jesus is faced with harsh conditions, crippling loneliness, and severe hunger. The three temptations to which he was subjected can be summed up as: One, the need to have his hunger satisfied, Two the need to be recognized and Three, the need to have absolute power. It is the evangelist's intention to show that Jesus is re-living the experience of his own people, who wandered in the desert for forty years and were often put to the test.

Permit me to focus on the first of the temptations. The devil proposes that Jesus change the stones of the desert into bread. In the Rabbinical tradition, it was thought that the long awaited Messiah would give everlasting bread. In so doing, he would do away with the plague of hunger and make it possible for all the world to have enough to eat. Jesus is not swayed by the devil's blandishments. He quotes a passage from the Torah, Deuteronomy 8:1-3. "He said in reply, 'It is written: One does not live on bread alone'." (Mt.4:4) Bread for the stomach, though indispensable, is not enough to nourish the human soul. Jesus is not denying the importance of social justice He is simply saying that only the Divine word can satisfy the inner yearning of the heart of man.

In a consumerist culture such as our own in which material comforts are the supreme goods in the minds of our increasingly secular populace, the care of the soul is very often forgotten and ignored. We spend an inordinate amount of time amusing ourselves and eating to our heart's content. Sadly, many of our churches are emptying at the same time as our restaurants and movie theaters are filled to capacity.

What lessons can we derive from today's gospel? First, Jesus overcame temptation with his human will. He faced his trials in a human way, showing his solidarity with his people, indeed all peoples. He chose not to display his divine power; second, the hearers of the Word are reminded that they, too, are engaged in a spiritual battle. Each day they must oppose the evil in the world. And what is most surprising is that the greatest evils may be lurking in the human heart, in the human imagination; third, as Catholics, we approach the Table of God's Word first. Only later do we approach the table of God's body (Holy Communion) at Mass; fourth, we must recover in our Lenten practice the habit of fasting. Let us recall that Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights, (Mt.4:1). We simply cannot dispense with the discipline of fasting!

The season of Lent is meant to be a forty day retreat. Let us all take advantage of the opportunity afforded us by Holy Mother Church.

Amen!