

Here we are, in the midst of our Forty day fast of Lent. It is fitting that at the beginning of this season we read the account of Our Lord's fast which provides us with the pattern for this most worthy practice. A forty day fast is a practice which we can see demonstrated throughout the scriptures. Our Lord fasted for forty days at the outset of His earthly ministry. Elijah fasted for forty days when he fled from Jezebel to Mt. Horeb. Moses on two occasions fasted for forty days and nights in the presence of the Lord, the first on Mt. Sinai when he received instruction as to the building of the tabernacle and the second when he petitioned the Lord to spare the children of Israel after they had fashioned and worshipped the golden calf. For forty days all of creation lay in penitential desolation as God sent rain to flood the earth. And so this period of time, this season, is well established in the scriptures as a time of prayer and fasting. We are to observe this season diligently and penitently, and to this end let us consider the example of Our Lord.

First, it must be noted that it is fasting which leads to Our Lord's temptation. Our Lord goes out into the wilderness to fast and pray, and the scripture says, "to be tempted by the devil." And it is after Jesus has fasted for forty days and nights that the tempter comes to Him. Many of the church fathers, including St. John Chrysostom, understand Jesus' fasting as a method of drawing the devil out. Christ brings on the temptations of the devil by fasting. Why? Why does Christ seek out an encounter with Satan? Surely he will be sufficiently tempted during his ministry? It is because, our Lord was continually redeeming mankind by his work on earth. Redemption is not limited to the cross. The whole gospel story is the story of God in the person of Jesus releasing the grip the devil has upon Creation. He has just come from his baptism, by which he establishes the new birth by water and the Spirit. He will go on to many miracles through which he releases people from bondage to sin and its effects. But here he takes on the responsibility of the New Adam to resist the devil's attempt to make him fall. The devil's path to victory is the same as it was with the first Adam: Cause him to turn from God. But this time Our Lord will not be swayed by his lies. He endures everything that the Devil threw at Adam and Eve and more, and remains faithful. This is what Jesus wanted to instigate. The total defeat of Satan required someone to resist his temptations. So Jesus fasted, and in his fasting he brought upon himself temptation. And so it is with us. When we fast we will be set upon by temptations. One very simple example is that it is certainly more difficult to be charitable, to be kind, when we are hungry. There is, in fact, a special term for this phenomenon. "Hangry" – hungry angry. And irritability is only one of the temptations which fasting may cause us to encounter. Slothfulness is another temptation which may very easily rise as a result of a restricted diet during lent.

It may be surprising that fasting is an occasion for temptation. For fasting is also described as a spiritual discipline by which we are strengthened and fortified against the schemes of the devil. How is it simultaneously something that weakens and strengthens? The answer is that though fasting weakens our natural ability to resist temptation, it forces us to rely on the power of Almighty God. As our physical body is weakened and our strength of will is reduced, we encounter anew vices and evils that had lain dormant within our hearts. We are able at most times to act respectably and in a broadly Christian way. However, when things go wrong, or in the case of our Lenten fast, when things go right, those human barriers we have constructed to preserve the appearance of virtue begin to crumble. We find that, perhaps even to our own surprise, we are not in fact kind and loving people. We are not self-controlled, or patient or joyful. All

those fruits of the spirit were, in fact, fruits of social pressure and human effort. And so as we fast in penitence, we find we have so much more occasion to be penitent than we even realized.

Yet the strengthening which we find in fasting is, having realized our own inadequacy, we are given the opportunity to rely on our Lord's strength. As we kneel in penitential sorrow, we are embraced by the power of God. Fasting does weaken us, but in our fasting as we affirm our need for God we receive from Him a much greater strength than we could ever possess. His is the power by which we are changed. The Holy Spirit is what makes us truly new creations. Fasting helps to force us into the mold which the Lord is fashioning for us.

Our gospel lesson also warns us what may be the nature of our temptations as we fast. The first temptation is to break the fast. 'And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.'"

The first temptation is simply, cease fasting. The devil presents the idea to Jesus as a conditional statement. "If you are the Son of God" surely you have no need for this fasting. And in truth, our Lord did not need to fast in the way that we do. He did not need to repent and increase his reliance on the Father. Yet, even He, perhaps for our sakes, resists the temptation and faithfully maintains the fast. This is an example to us. Even our Lord, being in very nature God, kept a devout fast. How much more are we in need of this same fasting. Let us therefore, resist the temptation of the devil to break the fast.

The devil next tempts Our Lord to spiritual pride, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you,' and "On their hands they will bear you up,

lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" Having resisted the first temptation, the devil says, "surely you must be an especially favored one of God's children. He will preserve you no matter what. Test how dear you are to the Father." And such is the temptation of the devil to us, as well. If we resist his first temptation, holding faithfully to our fasting, he next puts before us pride in our own spiritual rigor. Such is the wretchedness of our fallen state. Our good works become the very thing which makes us stumble. Let this not be so. When we do well this Lent, let us quickly and continually recognize that it is the Lord who does well in us, not we ourselves. As we confess in the daily offices, there is no health in us. May we not take pride in our own spiritual growth, rather glorify God for his great Mercy and Grace.

Finally, the tempter, all his subtlety abandoned, takes our Lord to the top of a mountain, showing Him all the glory of the world, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." In this, the devil attempts to subvert the entire purpose of creation, as he did in the garden. In the end, the devil can only offer idolatry. In the garden the tempter told Eve to use the tree of the knowledge of good and evil for her own glorification. And to Christ he offers much the same. Worship at the feet of Satan, and all the glory of God's creation will be yours.

Creation testifies to God's glory, yet we often attempt to make it sing our own praises. The wonders of food ought to speak to us of the goodness and wisdom of God. Yet, food for us becomes a vice - a means of self-gratification and

gluttonous excess. Sex is a testament to the love of God and His delight in us, but we are blind to its ability to communicate God because we are too concerned with ourselves. Even sleep speaks to us of the pleasure of peace and rest which is found in Our Lord. But for man it is an opportunity for self-indulgence and laziness. The glory of the world and its kingdoms is made to serve the tempter rather than its Creator.

Yet, this is the opposite of our endeavor in fasting. We fast so that the glory of the world might be to us, as it once was, an instrument of God's love. By fasting we put aside what is good in creation, not so that we might be indifferent to it, but so that it might once again take on its God glorifying nature. David Fagerberg writes, "How we managed to make the world worldly is the mystery of iniquity: somehow we took a gift from God that is thoroughly good and used it for sin. How the world is made sacrifice again is the mystery of salvation." In fasting we make a sacrifice of the things which we crave, so that they might once again become good for us.

This is why our fasting is followed by feasting. We do not fast because food is bad, or because we ought desire food less. Rather, we fast so that our self-focused desire for food might be transformed into a desire for God through His gift of food. The practical application of this teaching is that we should fast from truly good things. We should not merely abstain from things during lent which we want to want less, such as television or social media etc. Rather, our Lenten fast is about reconstituting our desire for those things which we interact with daily, so that they might point us to God, once again. Our feasting in Eastertide should be a joyous return to the things we gave up, finding them newly endowed with the weight of God's glory.

Therefore, let us be diligent and faithful. Let us resist the temptations which will beset us this Lenten season, and when we fall into temptation repent. It is either pride or despair which keeps us from repentance, even if when we have fallen many times. God will not reject us. Do not give up the pursuit of righteousness merely because you have failed to be righteous. Live the Christian life of fasting and prayer, repentance and confession, thanksgiving and praise so that we might be fit for our Easter feasting and more importantly the Heavenly feast which we eagerly anticipate.