



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament Genesis 2: 4b-9,15-17,25-3: 7
Epistle Romans 5:12-19
Gospel Matthew 4:1-11

Today's first reading mentions that humanity was formed from the dust of the earth. That's an interesting image to compare with that of last week's Ash Wednesday service in which the words of imposition are "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." And of course those words re-echo in the liturgy of Christian burial as we commit a body to the ground: "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust." It's a full circle, isn't it: the stuff of our creation is also the stuff of our repentance and ultimately the stuff to which the body returns. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. It reminds us of the impermanence of things, but also the power of God to build up human beings from small beginnings and empower them to do great things by faith and courage.

But the story of Creation that forms today's first lesson isn't meant to leave us in awe of the Lord, but to think about our betrayal of him. The story of Adam and Eve is a tragedy, really- the tale of a love affair between a man, a woman and a Creator gone terribly wrong and a bright future dashed. Temptation- that o-so-misused word that can cover anything from chocolate cake to adultery- is at the center of the story of Adam and Eve, and the by-now-classic ways that both husband and wife contrive to blame the other, resulting in their expulsion from Eden.

Temptation is also the point of today's Gospel. In it, Jesus is given his famous three tests by the devil, that same devious character we know from the first lesson, and withstands nobly to the end. But there is something not quite right about the way we normally hear the story of Jesus' temptation. We most often imagine it as a narrative, a play or even a short film. The hero, Jesus, is confronted by the villain, is tempted to betray what he knows is his destiny in exchange for the fleeting glories of the world, but rejects them all to ride off victorious into the sunset. End of temptations, end of story. Ta-da!.

But that's not how it was. Not really. The episode we heard today is a symbol of what Jesus went through all of his life. There was no single, final and conclusive temptation by Satan. Luke's version of the story is perhaps a bit more accurate when it says, "...When the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him *until an opportune time.*" And those times were frequent in Jesus life and ministry.

No, there was a lifetime of questions and seductions and the gnawing uncertainties of the "What if's?" The Greek author Nikos Kazantzakis wrote a famous novel entitled *The Last Temptation of Christ*. It was made into a rather mediocre movie in the 80's and made headlines for the near-riots that ensued when it was shown in Europe and the U.S. I thought the book was very powerful, myself. In it, we are given access to Jesus' inner thoughts as he thinks about his life and what could have happened if things had gone another way. In his vision while on the Cross, he sees himself married with Mary Magdalene, raising a family, living a normal life in relative obscurity. Things that any human being would long for and envy. But then Jesus comes to himself again and realizes the awful reality of the path that he has chosen. He dies there on the Cross resigned to the terrible glory of what God has used him for, and what he himself has chosen.

Jesus' temptations, though, are not meant for us to look at from afar, like a cheering section, or the spectators at a car wreck. His experience is our experience, and his temptations are ours. That is what the Incarnation means. It is not a show. It is not something that happens external to us, but rather is God's sharing of human life, nothing less and also nothing more: God chooses to become part of the dust that he

made, the stuff of his creation. And that stuff includes ceaseless struggle with voices from within and from without telling us that there must be an easier way, a more pleasant way, a more selfish way. Jesus, as the Son of God, was given the power to do divine things, and to use the famous quote, "Absolute power corrupts absolutely." Jesus did fight it and he did win, but it didn't happen just once in the wilderness. It happened whenever he healed with divine power, whenever he taught with divine authority, and most of all, when people loved him and ran to him and proclaimed him the Messiah. This was a constant. This was a given. This was his whole life.

And it is our whole life too. We shouldn't be shocked or disappointed when we are tempted even after feeling that we've made some kind of spiritual breakthrough. Recovering alcoholics are often terribly disappointed to discover that sobriety doesn't automatically free them from everyday aches and pains and the common cold. Jesus tells us that a soul cleaned from sins is irresistibly tempting to Satan who returns to find it cleaned and ready and unprepared for another attack. These things are part and parcel of human life, of the "dust and the ashes," even for the Christian. The story of his Temptation is not meant for us to feel good for Jesus and his victory, but to give us the chance to feel good about ourselves as part of him, and members of his Body. We, too, can say no. We too and tell Satan just where to go. And we too can return from our own personal deserts sadder, perhaps, but wiser in the things that will make us strong.