

# Sunday Homily

## FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

6 MARCH 2022

YEAR C

“Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

Luke 4:12

### Illustration

A game which many of us enjoy in childhood is sometimes referred to as playing “chicken”. The idea is to dare each other to do scary or illicit things and wait to see who will “chicken out” first. It relies upon the fact that everyone knows the rules and recognises that they may be punished if they are caught in the act: by parents, teachers, perhaps even the police.

But temptation for adults is often far more insidious than this sort of game. How many advertising agencies, for example, use temptation as their main selling stratagem time and time again: “Go on,” they say, “you know you can have just what you want; we have it right here” ... “naughty, but nice”, or “because you’re worth it”. They encourage us to think that we are in charge. The difficult thing for us to accept is that practices which look innocent enough at the start can very soon take over our personalities, making us acquisitive and selfish.

We live in a time when denying ourselves anything is hard. But in Christ’s temptations we may discover more of a shared experience than we might expect. At that moment all possibilities seemed open to him, as they often appear to us. Can we learn from his experience how to respond?

### Gospel Teaching

Three temptations were placed before Jesus: the first prompted him to satisfy a physical need – hunger. The second – rather more daring, as is often the way with temptations – offered him seemingly great personal power, while the third urged him to prove his identity as the Son of God. The temptations were proposed, quite deliberately, by God’s adversary – the devil. At this moment Jesus finds himself in the same position as Adam in the Garden of Eden. Can he resist, fulfilling God’s true purpose for him, or will he succumb?

The first temptation entices Jesus to feed himself after a long period of fasting. Although that seems reasonable, he is being encouraged to flout the rules of nature in transforming stone into bread. Not only would Jesus be perverting the physical properties of matter, as ordained by God, but he would also, in performing such a transformation, be denying the humanity he shared with us. For none of us, I think, can make bread from stones.

The second temptation offers Jesus earthly power – the kind of kingdom he claimed neither to own nor to seek. Yet to gain it he would have to serve an unworthy master, and the power gained would be a mere illusion. Saying “yes” to such an offer would be, still more obviously, to reject the role God had given him – and failing to fulfil his purposes.

The third temptation calls on Jesus to assert himself: to prove who he really is. It is an appeal to the most fundamental weakness of human nature: egocentricity. Jesus is offered a chance to flaunt his own identity, to be revealed as a god in his own right. This foreshadows the ultimate test of Christ’s obedience and faithfulness in God’s service: for Jesus’ response will be echoed in his passion and death.

## Application

Living in the world presents us all with similar temptations, although most of the time we are hardly aware of them. Dragged along by the prevailing culture, we don’t realise that we are still “playing chicken”. It takes very little to get fully immersed in the game. For we routinely aim to satisfy our own physical needs and desires first and foremost; we often crave worldly status and power over others; and most of all we want to stress our uniqueness over against all other beings – mortal or otherwise. We are tempted to make ourselves gods.

Lent, however, offers one of the “sanctuaries” of the Christian year – a time when we can stand back from the hurly-burly of our usual activities and reflect. Are we the kind of people who try God’s patience by thoughtless or wilful disobedience? How have we failed to be the people God made us to be? Can we change?

How seriously we attempt to encounter a spiritual wilderness, where our souls can be still, apart from life’s encumbrances and distractions, is partly a matter of choice. Yet our most tentative prayer can open us to God; contemplation, however brief, may allow the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps one day we may discover that the winner in a game of “chicken” is usually the one who refuses to play at all.