

First Sunday in Lent;

Matthew 4:1-11

The Fast and the Temptation of Christ

Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred. And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him.

I. THE FASTING OF CHRIST

I. This Gospel is read today at the beginning of Lent in order to picture before Christians the example of Christ, that they may rightly observe Lent, which has become mere mockery: first, because no one can follow this example and fast forty days and nights as Christ did without eating any food. Christ rather followed the example of Moses, who fasted also forty days and nights, when he received the law of God on mount Sinai. Thus Christ also wished to fast when he was about to bring to us, and give expression to, the new law. In the second place, Lent has become mere mockery because our fasting is a perversion and an institution of man. For although Christ did fast forty days, yet there is no word of his that he requires us to do the same and fast as he did. Indeed he did many other things, which he wishes us not to do; but whatever he calls us to do or leave undone, we should see to it that we have his Word to support our actions.

2. But the worst of all is that we have adopted and practiced fasting as a good work: not to bring our flesh into subjection; but, as a meritorious work before God, to atone for our sins and obtain grace. And it is this that has made our fasting a stench and so blasphemous and shameful, so that no drinking and eating, no gluttony and drunkenness, could have been as bad and foul. It would have been better had people been drunk day and night than to fast thus. Moreover, even if all had gone well and right, so that their fasting had been applied to the mortification of the flesh; but since it was not voluntary it was not left to each to do according to their own free will, but was compulsory by virtue of human commandment, and they did it unwillingly, it was all lost and to no purpose. I will not mention the many other evils as the consequences, as that pregnant mothers and their offspring, the sick and the weak, were thereby ruined, so that it might be called a fasting of Satan instead of a fasting unto holiness. Therefore we will carefully consider how this Gospel teaches us by the example of Christ what true fasting is.

3. The Scriptures present to us two kinds of true fasting: one, by which we try to bring the flesh into subjection to the spirit, of which St. Paul speaks in 2 Cor 6,5: "In labors, in watchings, in fastings." The other is that which we must bear patiently, and yet receive willingly because of our need and poverty, of which St. Paul speaks in 1 Cor 4, 11: "Even unto this present hour we both hunger, and thirst," and Christ in Mt 9,15: "When the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, then will they fast." This kind of fasting Christ teaches us here while in the wilderness alone without anything to eat, and while he suffers his penury without murmuring. The first kind of fasting, one can end whenever he wills, and can satisfy it by food; but the other kind we must observe and bear until God himself changes it and satisfies us. Hence it is much more precious than the first, because it moves in greater faith.

4. This is also the reason that the Evangelist with great care places it first: Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness, that he might there fast and be tempted, so that no one might imitate his example of their own choice and make of it a selfish, arbitrary, and pleasant fasting; but instead wait for the Spirit, who will send him enough fastings and temptations. For whoever, without being led by the Spirit, wantonly resorts to the danger of hunger or to any temptation, when it is truly a blessing of God that he can eat and drink and have other comforts, tempts God. We should not seek want and temptation, they will surely come of themselves; we ought then do our best and act honestly. The text reads: Jesus was led up of the Spirit into the wilderness; and not: Jesus himself chose to go into the wilderness. "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God." Rom 8, 14. God gives his blessings for the purpose that we may use them with thanksgiving, and not that we may let them lie idle, and thus tempt him; for he wishes it, and forces us to fast by the Spirit or by a need which we cannot avoid.

5. This narrative, however, is written both for our instruction and admonition. First, for instruction, that we should know how Christ has served and helped us by his fasting, hunger, temptation and victory; also that whoever believes on Christ shall never suffer need, and that temptation shall never harm him; but we shall have enough in the midst of want and be safe in the midst of temptation; because his Lord and Head triumphed over these all in his behalf, and of this he is assured, as Christ says in John 16,33: "Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." God, who was able to nourish Christ forty days without any food, can nourish also his Christians.

6. Secondly, this is written for our admonition, that we may in the light of this example also cheerfully suffer want and temptation for the service of God and the good of our neighbor, like Christ did for us, as often as necessity requires it; which is surely accomplished if we learn and confess God's Word. Therefore this Gospel is sweet consolation and power against the unbelief and infamy of the stomach, to awaken and strengthen the conscience, that we may not be anxious about the nourishment of our bodies, but be assured that he can and will give us our daily bread.

II. THE TEMPTATION OF CHRIST

7. But as to how temptation takes place and how it is overcome, is all very beautifully pictured to us here in Christ. First, that he is led up into the wilderness, that is, he is left solitary and alone by God, angels and men, by all creatures. What kind of a temptation would it be, if we were not forsaken and stood not alone? It is, however, painful when we do not feel anything that presents its back to us; as for example, that I should support myself and have not a nickel, not a thread, not a twig, and I experience no help from others, and no advice is offered. That means to be led into the desert and to be left alone. There I am in the true school, and I learn what I am, how weak my faith is, how great and rare true faith is, and how deeply unbelief is entrenched in the hearts of all men. But whoever has his purse, cellar and fields full, is not yet led into the desert, neither is he left alone; therefore he is not conscious of temptation.

8. Secondly, the tempter came forward and attacked Christ with these very same cares of food for the body and with the unbelief in the goodness of God, and said: "If thou art the Son of God, command that these stones become bread," as if he should say: Yes, trust thou in God and bake and cook nothing; only wait patiently until a roasted fowl flies into your mouth; do you now say that you have a God who cares for you; where is now your heavenly Father, who has charge of you? Yea, it seems to me he lets you in a fine condition; eat now and drink from your faith, let us see how you will satisfy your hunger; yea, when you have stones for bread. What a fine Son of God you are! How fatherly he is disposed toward you in that he fails to send you a slice of bread and permits you to be so poor and needy; do you now continue to believe that you are his son and he is your father? With like thoughts he truly attacks all the children of God. And Christ surely felt this temptation, for he was no stock nor stone; although he was and remained pure and without sin, as we cannot do.

9. That Satan attacked Christ with the cares for daily food or with unbelief and avarice, Christ's answer proves, in that he says: "Man shall not live by bread alone;" that sounds as if

he said: thou wilt direct me to bread alone and dost treat me as though I thought of nothing but the sustenance of my body. This temptation is very common also among pious people, and they especially feel it keenly who have children and a family, and have nothing to eat. Therefore St. Paul says in I Tim 6, 10 that avarice is a root of all kind of evil; for it is a fruit of unbelief. Do you not think that unbelief, care and avarice are the reasons people are afraid to enter married life? Why do people avoid it and live in unchastity, unless it be the fear that they must die of hunger and suffer want? But here we should consider Christ's work and example, who suffered want forty days and nights, and finally was not forsaken, but was ministered to even by angels.

10. Thirdly, behold how Christ resists this temptation of bread, and overcomes; he sees nothing but stones and what is uneatable then he approaches and clings to the Word of God, strengthens himself by it and strikes the devil to the ground with it. This saying all Christians should lay hold of when they see that there is lack and want and everything has become stones, so that courage trembles, and they should say: What were it if the whole world were full of bread, still man does not live by bread alone, but more belongs to life, namely, the Word of God. The words, however, are so beautiful and powerful that we must not pass over them lightly, but carefully explain them.

11. These words Christ quotes from Deut. 8,3, where Moses says: "Thy God humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by everything that proceedeth out of the mouth of Jehovah doth man live." That is as much as to say: Since God permits you to hunger and you still continue to live, you ought indeed to grasp the thought that God nourishes you without bread through his Word; for if you should live and sustain yourself by bread alone then you must continually be full of bread. But the Word, that nourishes us is, that he promises us and causes it to be published that he is our God and desires to be our God.

12. Thus now, the meaning of Moses and of Christ is: Whoever has here God's Word and believes, has both blessings; the first, where he is in want and has nothing, but must suffer hunger, that Word will sustain him, so that he will not die of hunger nor perish, just as well as if he had abundance to eat; for the Word he has in his heart nourishes and sustains him without eating and drinking. But has he little to eat, then a bite or slice of bread will feed and nourish him like a kingly meal; for not only bread but the Word of God also nourishes the body naturally, as it creates and upholds all things, Heb 1, 3. The other blessing he will also enjoy, namely, that finally bread will surely be at hand, come whence it will, and should it rain from heaven like manna where none grows and none can grow. In these two thoughts every person can freely trust, namely, that he must in time of hunger receive bread or something to eat, or if not, then his hunger must become so moderate and bearable that it will, nourish him even as well as bread does.

13. What has been said of eating and feeding the body he understood also of drinking, clothing, house, and all our needs: namely that although he still permits us to become naked and suffer want for clothing, house etc., clothing must finally be at hand, and before it fails the leaves of the trees must become coats and mantles; or if not, then the coats and garments

that we wear must never grow old; just as happened to the Children of Israel in the desert Deut. 8, 2-4, whose clothing and shoes never wore out. Likewise the wild wilderness must become their houses, and there must be a way where there is no way; and water, where there is no water; stones must become water. For here stands God's Word, which says: "He cares for you;" and St. Paul in 1 Tim 6, 17: "God giveth us richly all things to enjoy;" and Mt. 6,33-34: "But seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Be not therefore anxious for the morrow." These and like words must continue true and stand forever firm.

14. All this one may indeed learn from his own daily experiences. For it is held, and I almost believe it, that there are not as many sheaves of wheat grown as there are people living on the earth; but God daily blesses and increases the wheat in the sack, the flour in the tray, the bread on the table and in the mouth, as Christ did. John 6, 12 f. It is also noticeable that as a rule poor people and their children are fatter and their food reaches farther and agrees with them better than is the case among the rich with all their provisions. However that the godless at times suffer need, or in times of famine many die of hunger, is caused by a special plague as pestilence, war etc. In other ways we see that in all things it is not the food, but the Word of God that nourishes every human being.

15. Now that God sustains all mankind by bread, and not by the Word alone, without bread, is done to the end, that he conceals his work in the world in order to exercise believers; just as he commanded the children of Israel to arm themselves and to fight, and yet it was not his pleasure that victory should come through their own sword and deeds; but he himself was to slay their enemies and triumph with their swords and through their deeds. Here it might also be said: The warrior was not victorious through his sword alone, but by every word that proceeded out of the mouth of God, as David sings, Ps 44,6: "For I will not trust in my bow, neither shall my sword save me." Also Ps 147, 10 and 33, 16-17: "He taketh no pleasure in the legs of a man. A mighty man is not delivered by great strength. A horse is a vain thing for safety." Yet he uses man and the horse, the sword and bow: but not because of the strength and power of man and of the horse, but under the veil and covering of man and the horse he fights and does all. This he proves in that he often did and daily does the same without man and the horse, where there is need and he is not tempted.

16. Thus he does also with the bread; since it is at hand, he nourishes us. through it and by means of it, so that we do not see it and we think the bread does it; but where it is not at hand, there he nourishes us without the bread, only through the Word, as he does by means of the bread; so that thus bread is God's helper, as Paul says in 1 Cor 3,9: "We are God's fellow workers," that is, through and under our outward ministerial office he gives inwardly his grace, which he also could give and does give indeed without our office; but since the office is at hand, one should not despise it nor tempt God. Thus God sustains us outwardly by bread; but only inwardly he gives that growth and permanency, which the bread cannot give. And the summary is: All creatures are God's larva and mummery, which he permits to work with him and to help to do everything that he can do and does do otherwise without their cooperation, in order that we may cleave alone to his Word. Thus, if bread is at hand, that we do not therefore trust the more; or if there is no bread present, that we do not

therefore despair the more; but use it when it is at hand, and do without it, when there is none; being assured that we shall still live and be sustained at both times by God's Word, whether there be bread or no bread. With such faith one overcomes avarice and temporal care for daily bread in the right way.

17. Christ's second temptation is opposed to the first and is repugnant to common sense. Its substance is that the devil teaches us to tempt God; as he here calls to Christ to cast himself down from the pinnacle of the temple, which was not at all necessary, since there were surely good steps upon which he could descend. And that this temptation was for the purpose of tempting or making trial of God, the answer of Christ also clearly proves, when he says: "Thou shalt not make trial of the Lord thy God." By this he shows that the devil wished to lead him into temptation.

18. And this very appropriately follows the first temptation. For where the devil feels a heart trusts God in times of want and need, he soon ceases his temptation of bread and avarice and thinks: Wait, wilt thou be very spiritual and believing, I will assist you: He approaches and attacks on the other side, that we might believe where God has not commanded us to believe, nor wills that we should believe. For example, if God gave you bread in your homes, as he does yearly everywhere in the world, and you would not use it, but instead you would cause need and want yourselves, and say: Why, we are to believe God; I will not eat the bread, but will patiently wait until God sends me manna from heaven. See, that would be tempting God; for that is not believing where all is at hand that we need and should have. How can one believe that he will receive what he already has?

19. Thus you see here that Satan held before Christ want and need where there was neither want nor need; but where there was already good means by which to descend from the temple without such a newly devised and unnecessary way of descending. For this purpose Satan led Christ to the top of the temple, in the holy city, says the Evangelist, and placed him in a holy place. For he creates such precious thoughts in man that he thinks he is filled with faith and is on the true way of holiness; and yet he does not stand in the temple, but is only on the outside of the temple, that is, he is not in the true holy mind or life of faith; and yet he is in the holy city; that is, such persons are found only in Christendom and among true Christians, who bear a great deal of preaching about faith. To these persons he applies the sayings of Scripture. For such persons learn Scripture also by daily hearing it; but not farther than they can apply it to their erroneous opinions and their false faith. For Satan here quotes from the Psalter, Ps 91, 11-12, that God commanded the angels that they should protect the children of God and carry them on their hands. But Satan like a rogue and cheat fails to quote what follows, namely, that the angels shall protect of God in all their ways. For the Psalm reads thus: "For he will give his angels charge over thee to keep thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone;" hence the protection of the angels does not reach farther, according to the command of God, than the ways in which God has commanded us to walk. When we walk in these ways of God, his angels take care of us. But the devil omits to quote "the ways of God" and interprets and applies the protection of the angels to all things, also to that which God has not commanded; then it fails and we tempt God.

20. Now, this temptation seldom takes place in outward things as bread, clothing, house, etc. For we find many foolhardy people, who risk and endanger life, their property and honor, without any need of doing so; as those do who wilfully enter into battle or jump into the water, or gamble for money, or in other ways venture into danger, of whom the wise man says in Sirach 3, 27: "Whoever takes pleasure in danger, will thereby be overcome;" for in the degree one struggles to get a thing, will he succeed in obtaining it; swimmers are likely to drown and good climbers likely to fall. Yet it is seldom that those of false faith in God abstain from bread, clothing and other necessities of life when they are at hand. As we read of two hermits, who would not accept bread from the people, but thought God should send it to them directly from heaven; so the consequence was that one died and went to his father, the devil, who taught him such faith and left him fall from the pinnacle.

21. But in spiritual matters this temptation is powerful when one has to do with the nourishment not of the body but of the soul. Here God has held before us the person and way, by which the soul can be forever nourished in the richest manner possible without any want, namely Christ, our Saviour. But this way, this treasure, this provision no one desires. Everybody seeks another way, other provisions to help their souls. The real guilty ones are those who would be saved through their own work; these the devil sets conspicuously on the top of the temple. They follow him and go down where there is no stairway; they believe and trust in their own work where there is no faith nor trust, no way nor bridge, and break their necks. But Satan makes use of and persuades them through the Scriptures to believe that the angels will protect them, and that their way, works and faith are pleasing to God, and who called them through the Scriptures to do good works; but they do not care how falsely they explain the Scriptures.

22. Who these are, we have identified often enough and very fully, namely, work righteous persons and unbelieving hypocrites under the name of being Christians and among the congregation of Christian people. For the temptation must take place in the holy city and one temptation is seldom against another. In the first temptation want and hunger are the reasons that we should not believe; and by which we become anxious to have a full sufficiency, so that there is no chance for us to believe. In the second temptation, however, the abundance and the full sufficiency are the reasons that we do not believe, by which we become tired of the common treasure, and every one tries to do something through his own powers to provide for his soul. So we do; if we have nothing, then we doubt God and believe not; if we have abundance, then we become tired of it and wish to have something different, and again we fail to believe. There we flee and turn against want and seek abundance: here we seek want and flee from the abundance we have. No, whatever God does for us, is never right. Such is the bottomless, wickedness of our unbelief.

23. Christ's third temptation consists in temporal honor and power; as the words of the devil clearly teach, when Satan shows and offers Christ all the kingdoms of the world if he would worship him. To this class those belong who fall from their faith for the sake of honor and power, that they may enjoy good days, or not believe further than their honor and power extend. Such are also the heretics who start sects and factions in matters of faith among Christians, that they may make a great parade before the world and soar aloft in their own

honor. Hence one may place this third temptation on the right, and the first on the left side. The first is the temptation of misfortune, by which man is stirred to anger, impatience and unbelief; the third and last, the temptation of prosperity, by which man is enticed to lust, honor, joy, and whatever is high. The second or middle temptation is spiritual and deals with the blind tricks and errors that mislead reason from faith.

24. For whom the devil cannot overcome with poverty, want, need and misery, he attacks with riches, favor, honor, pleasure, power and the like, and contends on both sides against us; yea, "he walketh about," says St. Peter in 1 Pet 5,8, so that if he cannot overthrow us either with suffering or love, that is, with the first temptation on the left or the third on the right, he retires to a higher and different method and attacks us with error, blindness and a false understanding of the Scripture. If he wins there, we fare ill on all sides and in all things; and whether one suffers poverty or has abundance, whether he fights or surrenders, all is lost. For when one is in error, neither patience in misfortune nor firmness in prosperity helps him; seeing that in both heretics are often powerful and the devil deliberately acts as if he were overcome in the first and last temptations, although he is not, if he has only won in the middle or second temptation. For he lets his own children suffer much and be patient, even at times to spurn the world; but never with a true and honest heart.

25. Now these three temptations taken together are heavy and hard; but the middle one is the greatest; for it attacks the doctrine of faith itself in the soul, and is spiritual and in spiritual matters. The other two attack faith in outward things, in fortune and misfortune, in pleasure and pain etc., although both severely try us. For it is sad that one should lay hold of heaven and ever be in want and eat stones where there is no bread. Again, it is sad to despise favors, honor and possessions, friends and associates, and let go what one already has. But faith, rooted in God's Word, is able to do all things; is faith strong, then it is also easy for the believer to do this.

26. The order of these temptations, as they met Christ, one cannot absolutely determine; for the Evangelists give them in different order. The temptation Matthew places as the middle one, Luke places last, Luke 4,4 f.; and again, the temptation Luke places in the middle, Matthew places last, as if little depended on the order. But if one wished to preach or speak of them, the order of Luke would be the better. For it is a fine opportunity to repeat and relate that the devil began with want and misfortune; when that did not work, then he began with prosperity and honor; and last, when all fails, that he wantonly and wickedly springs forth and strikes people with terror, lies and other spiritual tricks. And since they have no order in practice and experience, but as it happens that a Christian may be attacked at one time with the last, and another time with the first etc., Matthew gave little attention to the order for a preacher to observe in speaking of this theme. And perhaps it was also the same with Christ through the forty days that the devil held to no order, but today attacked him with this and tomorrow with another temptation, and again in ten days with the first and so on, just as occasion was given.

27. At last angels approached and served him. This must have taken place in a literal sense, that they appeared in a bodily form and gave him to eat and drink, and just as at a table, they ministered to all his wants. For the service is offered outwardly to his body, just like, no

doubt, the devil, his tempter, also appeared in a bodily form, perhaps like an angel. For, seeing that he places him on the pinnacle of the temple and shows him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment, he must have been a higher being than a man, since he represents himself as a higher being, in that he offers him all the kingdoms of the world and permits himself to be worshiped. But he surely did not bear the form of the devil, for he desires to be beautiful when he lies and deceives, as St. Paul says of him in 2 Cor 11, 14: "For even Satan fashioneth himself into an angel of light."

28. This however is written for our comfort, that we may know that many angels minister also to us, where one devil attacks us; if we fight with a knightly spirit and firmly stand, God will not let us suffer want, the angels of heaven would sooner appear and be our bakers, waiters and cooks and minister to all our wants. This is not written for Christ's sake for he does not need it. Did the angels serve him, then they may also serve us.

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