

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The First Sunday of Lent
March 5, 2017

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The temptation of Christ in the wilderness is an incident familiar to us all, and for two reasons. By tradition, this is the Mass gospel on the First Sunday of Lent. You hear it every year. And secondly, you and I are (unfortunately) *experts* at the experience of temptation. We know all about it. Holy Mother Church, ever practical in her counsel and guidance, first encourages us to take on Lenten discipline, and then warns us about temptation. She does that by recounting the greatest story of temptation ever.

Part of the very definition of temptation is it comes dressed up in *respectability*. The Devil offers to “help” Jesus with what He wants to do. Likewise, you and I are never snared to do something we do not want. Temptations have their force when they appeal to things we may even *rightly* desire. The devil knows how to load the deck. His offer was to help Jesus proclaim His Kingdom.

We miss the great moment of the encounter, however, when we misunderstand the Lord’s rejection of the Devil’s offer. When Jesus said, “Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God,” He wasn’t instructing Satan. The father of lies knows the truth. That is part of his evil. That is not what was happening. Jesus was *reminding Himself* of the Ten Commandments. He was thinking out loud, in the presence of the enemy. Mary’s son was being tempted as we are, in basic human equipment. Jesus was reminding Himself of the catechism He learned in the synagogue school. The rabbis in Nazareth had said not to tempt our heavenly Father by making a trial of God’s love, by putting His power to the test, by deliberately exposing yourself to danger and daring the Lord God to neglect you.

The temptation of Christ in the wilderness is part of the Gospel good news because it reveals Almighty God’s solidarity with our fallen human nature. The Blessed Lord Jesus, the One on Whom the Father looked and found nothing but perfection, permitted Himself to be tempted by that old deceiver and first-rate sleaze-ball: the enemy of souls. Think of that! If you and I can call the devil such names, how repugnant must he have appeared to the One Who is Perfect Holiness! For his part, Satan would not have dared to confront Almighty God with temptation. Evil is many things but it is not stupid! But the devil could approach Jesus of Nazareth, because Mary’s son, like every man, is vulnerable to temptation.

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Our Lord shows us the way. It is right to trust God to rescue us in His Own time and in the way He sees best for us, to save us from all the dangers and tribulations that can befall us in this life. But to go after danger willfully and expect Almighty God to extricate us from our own recklessness is a much different thing. We are never in a position to force God's hand or presume His goodness will act as we expect or demand. Christians are never to surrender our confidence in God's goodness, but we do not go looking for trouble! We tempt God when we go out of our way to place ourselves in situations dangerous to faith and morals. We are wrong to lightheartedly court occasions to sin, telling ourselves it is harmless. We are wrong to say something is all right for us when our conduct may cause offence or stumbling to one who is not so strong.

“Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God” is no mere negative precept once learned in Hebrew school! It was for Jesus thirty years later in the Judaeen wilderness. It is for you *now*. Make up your mind not only this Lent but also for *all* of life: to walk safely in a world of temptations, and fortify yourself against the allurements of a selfish and self-centered, hedonistic, world. You are not going to do that by lecturing the devil! You do this by prayer and sacraments, by studying God's Word to know His will for you, and giving yourself to His will, by abandoning self-assertion, and placing yourself in God's hands. This is what Saint Paul calls putting on “*the whole armor of God*”. *Do what Jesus did*. He shows the way. In the moment of temptation the Lord remembered the Ten Commandments. In the hearing of the devil himself Jesus *reminded Himself*, “Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.” And what happened next? Part of the Gospel good news is that “the angels came, and ministered unto Him.”