

Lenten Recollection: Sin and Conversion (March 2024)

Introduction

Lent is a special time in our liturgical calendar. In the Gospel of Ash Wednesday Jesus presents us with a triple advise, which goes much deeper than the simple practice of giving up A (alcohol), B (biscuits) and C (chocolates) during lent.

Jesus challenges us with the words: “when you give alms’...; when you pray...; when you fast...”. It means that we are asked to examine in depth our triple relationship with our **neighbour (almsgiving)**, with **God (prayer)** and with **creation (fasting)**.

1. Some reflections on temptation and sin.

Temptation in itself is not a sin. But it is possible that temptation becomes an occasion for sin. Moreover, we often forget that temptation can also be an occasion for good, because it shows the real depth of the heart and makes a personal choice possible. Temptation is therefore a place of liberty and truth, of grace offered, received or refused.

Another thing that we may frequently forget is that temptation does not come from outside ourselves, but from within, from our mind and heart (Mt.15,10-20). This is why nobody is tempted in the same way, because everybody is different. This is also why it is so important to discover the secret ways of sin and grace in our lives.

The third thing to emphasize is that sin is not random; it is always the result of a process and it leads to a distorted or even broken relationship with our neighbour, with God or with creation. Some sins are called basic, namely **Deceit, Despair and Division**, because these are exactly the opposite of the theological virtues of **Faith, Hope and Love**.

The book of Genesis can help us in getting a deeper insight in those 3 fundamental sins. In Gen.1,3-13 we see how Satan **deceives** Adam and Eve in the garden. He proposes to them to eat the forbidden fruit in order to become equal with God. As a consequence of their disobedience, they discover their nakedness or their

nothingness in front of God. This way of deceiving by Satan can lead to various forms of idolatry as we shall see later in the temptations of Jesus.

In Gen.4,1-16, in the story of Cain and Abel, we see how jealousy leads to **despair** and even homicide. Because Cain thinks his offering is not well looked upon by God as compared to the sacrifice of Abel, he decides to kill his brother. God cries out to Cain “where is your brother?” Cain replies: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” This is one of the most challenging questions in the whole Bible!

In Gen.11,1-9, in the story of the tower of Babel we see how God scattered people all over the earth and confused their language, since they were trying to be equal with God or to reach the same level of greatness. **Divisions** of all sorts, cultural, political, economic, social and religious, prevent the growing of God’s kingdom in the world and the unity for which Jesus prayed.

The temptations of Jesus in the desert.

This is the theme of the Gospel on the first Sunday of lent. We mentioned above that Satan uses various forms of deceit in trying to divert our attention from God. In Mt.4,1-11 or in Lk.4,1-12 we find a perfect illustration of the cunning tactics of Satan. What is at stake is not even a fight between good and evil, but a struggle for the heart and mind of Jesus.

We note that Satan does not tempt Jesus with what is bad or wrong, on the contrary he pretends to confirm him in his mission. He says: “If you are the Son of God...” and even quotes Scripture! Instead of opposing the mission of Jesus, Satan tries to divert Jesus from his mission.

The first temptation is about turning stones into bread... What could be more laudable?! Jesus will give bread in abundance, he will feed the hungry crowds. He will go even as far as calling himself ‘the Bread of Life’. However, bread here represents wealth, money, material goods, honourable positions, etc. These are not bad things in themselves. The only danger is that they can attract all our attention and take the place of God in our lives, thus distracting us from our single minded service of God and neighbour. Jesus wants **that we give first place to God and share our riches or possessions with those in need.**

The second temptation is about ruling over all the kingdoms. Again, is that not Jesus' mission? Did he not declare himself king in front of Pilate? He is not called king of the universe? However, the kingdoms represent power and might, it is probably the most tricky temptation. Power can be exercised over others in many ways, there can be political, economic, social, religious and sexual abuse of power. It can be extremely subtle and power struggles are present everywhere in society and indeed in the Church. Jesus wants us **to exercise power as rendering a service.**

The third temptation is about throwing himself down from the temple and being carried by angels...Is that not what Jesus achieved by his determination and his freedom before his judges and executioners? Jesus himself said that his Father could send an army of angels from heaven to protect him from being handed over. Throwing himself down from the temple represents being successful and proud. Jesus gave himself freely into the hands of sinners and commended his spirit in the hands of his Father. Jesus wants us **to be humble and become like little children.**

In the desert, the devil tempted Jesus right at the bottom of his heart. The desire for **possessions, power and pride** is deeply rooted in each person's heart and there is need for a constant struggle to overcome it. That is why we need an ongoing conversion. Pope Francis has his own way of warning bishops, priests and religious against these three dangerous trappings. He calls them **BBC or Bourgeois lifestyle, Bureaucracy and Clericalism.** A strong antidote against the temptations of possessions, power and pride are the three evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience.

By refuting the temptations of Satan, Jesus makes a fundamental choice right at the beginning of his mission. It forms one of the keys to understanding the whole gospel message which is based on an attitude of simplicity, service and humility.

Jesus will remain faithful to this choice right till the end of his life, especially when Satan returns to tempt Jesus during his agony in the garden of olives, when he tries again to divert Jesus from his mission.

2. Conversion

Our reflection on sin and its consequences leads us to the need for conversion, for a change of heart and for reconciliation with God, our neighbour and creation.

Conversion holds a very prominent and important place in Jesus' teaching. In fact, he begins his public life with a general call to conversion. (Mk.1,15). Also John the Baptist, the frontrunner of Jesus, preached a message of repentance (Mk.1,4).

In the gospels we discover a preferential love of Jesus for the individual sinner, not for sin, especially when he or she repents freely. Jesus goes as far as going in search of the lost sheep in order to bring it back home. Other examples are Jesus' table fellowship with sinners (Mt.9,10-13) and (Lk.15,1-3) and his attitude towards the adulterous woman (Jn.8,3-11).

The best example of God's love for the repentant sinner is found in Lk.15 where we find the three parables of God's mercy, namely the lost sheep, the lost drachma and the prodigal son. (Lk.15, 4-32)

The pattern of conversion is best illustrated in the parable of the prodigal son or of the merciful father. It contains five steps:

- a) a deep faith or trust in God's unconditional love, mercy and compassion.
- b) a personal awareness of my sinfulness, admitting my guilt in all humility.
- c) a deep feeling of sorrow and regret.
- d) a sincere desire to reject sin and find inner freedom, relying on God's grace and strength.
- e) an experience of joy, peace and gratitude for having been forgiven by God.

In conclusion we could say that the whole history of Israel can be summed up as a story of sin and conversion and as individuals we do resemble that story.

Some Biblical texts about sin and conversion:

1Jn.1,8-10 and Mt.15,10-20 (the reality of sin in our lives)

Gen. 3,1-13 (Adam & Eve);

Gen.4,1-16 (Cain & Abel);

Gen.11,1-9 (the tower of Babel);

Ex.32,1-6 (the golden calf)

Mt.4,1-11 or Lk.4,1-12 (the temptations of Jesus)

Jer.2,26-31 and Jer.3,12-13 (Israel's apostasy and conversion)

Bar.1,15-2,10 and Bar.2,10-3,8 (Israel's sin and prayer for forgiveness)

2 Sam.11,1-17 and 12,1-15 (David's sin and conversion)

Lk.22, 54-60 and Lk.22, 61-62 (Peter's denial and repentance)

3. For further reflection:

*If Jesus was tempted by Satan in order to divert him from his mission, what about us?!

*We could ask ourselves: "what is my biggest temptation? What kind of idolatry do I engage in? Where am I struggling most?"

*Jesus says: "where your heart is, there will also be your treasure". What is my real treasure?

*How can I make room for the kingdom of God to take root in my heart and life? It is clear in Jesus' life that his only treasure is Abba, his heavenly father.

*How can I succeed in avoiding the trappings of Satan?

*A daily awareness examen is a precious tool for an ongoing conversion.

Jos Van Boxel (M.Afr.)

Ash Wednesday 2024