

Today we behold our Hero. Satan is too much for us. On earth is not his equal, and with might of ours can naught be done. We would have been forever swept along by temptation and sin, unable to resist, swept right into hell, had not the Son of God appeared in the flesh to destroy the works of the devil. Now victory is ours! Christ has entered the lists and fought and won. The devil is beaten. We are no longer subject to his temptations and lies. We are set free: free from sin, free from hell, and free to resist the devil.

Today's reading immediately follows the Baptism of Jesus. At His Baptism the heavens were opened to Him and the Holy Spirit descended on Him and the Father's voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." This was Jesus' anointing, His official inauguration into His ministry. And after that inauguration Jesus at once sets about doing what He came to do. "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." Jesus at once goes where man had been before: against the devil, to whom Adam and Eve had lost, into the wilderness, where the sons of Israel had succumbed to every temptation. Jesus at once retraces man's steps so that He as man might stand where we had fallen. In this we see His eagerness for our salvation. Jesus does not stick around the Jordan to revel in the wonder and awe of the crowds, but plunges immediately into the combat that would save us.

The life of Christ is the life of the Christian. This is not merely a call to imitation, but is the simple fact of the matter. Your life as a Christian will look like the life of Christ. He has joined you to Himself. He is the great Shepherd of the sheep, and where the Shepherd leads, the sheep follow. This says a great deal about what you can expect of life as a Christian. You likewise have been baptized, and heaven has been opened to you and the Spirit of God has descended on you and the Father has said, "This is My beloved son with whom I am well pleased." And just as Jesus at once found an enemy, you do as well. Therefore, as much as we see our Hero in today's reading, we also see the temptations that will come against us and how to resist them. But Jesus goes before us. The stronger man tramples down the strong enemy and leads us to place our feet in the great heel print that He has left in the serpent's head.

Because the life of Christ is the life of the Christian, the temptations of the devil in our reading probably sound familiar, not the part about turning stones into bread or leaping from the temple or bowing down to him to receive kingdoms, but the repeated phrase, "If You are the Son of God." You have heard these words before. "If you are really a child of God, why should there be any scarcity in your life? Why shouldn't you be able to do what you want? Why shouldn't you be prosperous?" This is the devil's basic

temptation. He questions your identity, and he uses all other temptations to make you doubt that you really are a child of God.

But Jesus knew the voice that He heard when He was baptized. He knew that the Father had said, “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.” There was no room for “if You are the Son of God.” He is the Son of God, and He knows it. You can similarly know that you are a child of God, for whose word is stronger? Whose word carries the greater weight? Is it the word of Satan, who says, “If you are a child of God”? Or is it the Word of God, who says, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”? The Word of God created the heavens and the earth. His Word says what is. The devil is known to be a liar. His native tongue is falsehood. Remember this when the devil tempts you to question who you are in Christ. Do not believe him. Heed the Word of God. Listen to the truth of His Word. As Jesus shows when He is tempted, the Word of God is the unfailing sword against which the devil cannot stand.

But let us examine the temptations that Jesus faced, both for further comfort and further instruction. Jesus was in the wilderness, “And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry.” When the devil tempted Adam and Eve to eat, they were in the midst of paradise and felt no pangs of hunger. Here Jesus feels the most extreme hunger pangs

that man could feel. As God He fasts an extraordinarily long time, and as a man he feels every meal He missed gnawing at His stomach. In fact, Jesus uses His divine nature to feel a suffering in His flesh that would have killed any other man. He faces the devil's temptations in extreme pain and bodily weakness, and the temptation is all the sharper because of His hunger. Jesus does this in order to overcome the greatest temptation, that we might have confidence in Him to see us through our lesser temptations. Thus is written in Hebrews 4, "we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). And therefore, as it says in Hebrew 2, "For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted" (Heb. 2:18).

When Jesus felt the most extreme hunger ever felt by man, the devil came to Him and said, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." In other words, "What kind of Son of God are You if Your heavenly Father won't even give you a crumb? Even earthly fathers feed their children, yet You have nothing. You're no child of God, and if You're going to get by, You're going to have to take matters into Your own hands." This is the temptation of scarcity and misfortune. When it seems that we lack something, the devil is not far from us, trying to stir up

discontent, trying to convince us that God has forsaken us. It's a familiar temptation.

But note how Jesus responds. He says, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." Jesus quotes those words from Deuteronomy 8, words that Moses preached to the people of Israel to help them reflect rightly on what they had experienced in the wilderness. And consider the truth of these words. If man did live by bread alone, then man would have to be full of food constantly. If man lived only on earthly food, then hunger—feeling a need for food that isn't there—would mean death. This is how the stomach thinks. When it says, "I'm hungry," it's saying, "Feed me or I shall die!" Yet you all know that is not true. You have been hungry before, sometimes quite hungry, and yet here you sit, alive and well. And you sit here alive and well because man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

So when you are in the midst of lack and misfortune and the devil tempts you, do not just answer like Jesus did, but answer with His exact words: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." So what, devil, if I lack this or that? You would have me think that the one thing needful is food, but the Word of God is infinitely

superior. God can, by His Word, take the little food that I do have and make it sit in my belly like a king's feast. God can, by His Word, command bread to fall from heaven or tell the ravens to bring me my meat. And if God chooses not to do these things, that does not prove that I am forsaken. It only shows that I do not perceive my own needs rightly and He has seen fit to teach me something about the ultimate necessity of His Word.

When the devil does not have success tempting Jesus to value food and His belly over the Word of God, then the devil suddenly turns theologian, brings Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple, and says, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written: 'He shall give His angels charge concerning you,' and, 'In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.'" The devil says, "You can stake your very life on the Word of God," and that is correct, so long as the Word of God is pure. But Satan has not quoted the Word of God rightly. The passage he quotes is from Psalm 91, and he has left out some words, "For He shall give His angels charge of you, to keep you in all your ways. They shall bear you up in their hands, lest you dash your foot against a stone" (Ps. 91:11-12). God has promised to guard us in all our ways, not in the sense that we get to go our own way and God is obligated to protect us in

our obstinate idiocy, but in the sense that as we go about our God-given duties, we have the promise that the angels stand guard over us.

The devil tries similar deceits with us. If he sees that we regard the Word of God highly, then he takes that Word of God and alters it, he twists it, and tries to pass it off as the genuine article. In short, this is a temptation to believe false doctrine. Now there are about as many heresies as there are Bible verses, so I cannot list every possible temptation to heresy. But I will note that all heresy leads to disappointment, and believing it is like throwing yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple, except instead of shattering your head on the temple court, you shatter your faith, typically believing that your works are sufficient to save you, or that you are a lost cause, or that you can do whatever you want because of the forgiveness of sins. These are general conclusions of the devil's lies, but they are nevertheless familiar temptations.

Jesus does not fall to this temptation either. He answers, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test,'" which is to say that we take God and His Word on His terms and not our own. We do not tinker with the Word, or ignore parts of it, or twist its interpretation to suit our own purposes. And besides the obvious fact that it is wrong to mess with God's stuff, we have a great reason not to do so standing right before us in the

reading. The pure, unaltered Word of God stated that a Savior would come and redeem us and crush the devil, and there the Savior stands according to that pure, unaltered Word of God. If it were good for God's Word to be altered and impure, then the devil would be standing alone in the wilderness in today's reading and the Son of God would be up in heaven not feeling forty days' worth of hunger pangs. But thanks be to God, the Word of God remained pure and unaltered, and the Son of God came and stands there fighting and conquering the devil on our behalf and pressing on to complete our redemption.

The pure, unaltered Word of God is good. When the devil tries to say otherwise, you say, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." That is God's Word you are messing with. If you want to quote Psalm 91, Satan, why do you not keep going past verse 12 and quote verse 13, in which God tells His saints, "You shall tread upon the lion and the cobra, The young lion and the serpent you shall trample underfoot" (Ps. 91:13). Jesus kept the pure Word of God and crushed your head. So I am not going to trust my own works, and I am not going to despair as if I had no hope, and I am not going to transgress the Word of my Savior as if sin were not sin. I will not test God.



In the third temptation, the devil leaves behind the Word of God and returns his focus to the things of earth. He did not succeed with his first temptation of scarcity, so he tries in this third the temptation of plenty. “Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, ‘All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me.’” “Look, you can have all the stuff of earth. It’s right here in front of you, and it can be yours. Why suffer? Why take up your cross? Why set your hope elsewhere? Here’s hope enough in money and power and pleasure. Devote yourself to these things. Why be a child of God when you have all this?” Again, this is a familiar temptation, to set our minds on the things of earth and not on things that are above.

“Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.’” Thus Jesus says. He knew His course. He knew the cross that it would bring. And He did not for a second waver or doubt or shrink from it. Again Jesus gives us the greatest reason for resisting this temptation. Even though all things were created through Him and even though He had more claim than anyone to the stuff of earth, He set His own mind on things above, saying, “Yes, Father, most willingly I will bear what You command.” This is not just a point about imitation. The

point is that Jesus shows us the good in resisting this temptation. If He had not resisted it, we would not be saved. But He did resist this temptation, and He continued on to the cross, and He bore it gladly, and He was made to be sin who knew no sin so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. See what good came from Jesus resisting this temptation! So good will always come from resisting this temptation.

Therefore, when the devil tempts you to love the things of earth above God, you can say, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve." Has money borne my sins? Have popularity or fame made atonement for me? Have earthly power or pleasure made me righteous before God? Of course not! But Jesus has done all these things, and He has shown me how much good there is in worshiping the Lord only. So I will stand with Jesus, who said, "Away with you, Satan," and you had to obey Him. I will stand with Jesus, who gives me more than all this life can offer. I will stand with Jesus, who bears with my weaknesses and forgives my sins when I fall into temptation and strengthens me to live according to the Spirit whom I received when God called me His own child in Baptism. For that is what I am: God's own child.

See the devil slink away at the end of the reading! See him running scared! He tempted a man like he had tempted other men, but this time he

lost. He lost to Jesus. And the devil would lose much more, as we'll hear during Lent and Holy Week. With might of ours can naught be done, soon were our loss effected. But for us fights the Valiant One. And He still fights. When you are tempted, you do not face the devil alone. Jesus has united you to Himself in Holy Baptism, and when the devil goes after you, he has to reckon with a Lord to whom he has already lost. Our Savior has gone before us and has trampled the enemy. The devil no longer has any power over you, and as you follow Jesus through this life, you likewise trample the serpent, as it is written in Psalm 91, "the serpent you shall trample under foot." "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you" (Rom. 16:20). Amen