

Reflection

First Sunday of Lent, March 10, 2019

A story is told from the rabbinical lore of the Jewish faith. A wise rabbi wished to have a glimpse of how people thought of themselves. He decided to ask three men a question. He called to one man and asked him, "If you found a purse of gold coins, what would you do with it?" "I would look for the owner and give it back," he replied. "You are a fool," the rabbi exclaimed.

The rabbi asked a second man, who answered, "I wouldn't look for the owner. I'd keep it for myself." "You are a scoundrel," said the rabbi.

Then he put the question to the third man. "How can I possibly know, rabbi, what I would do in that situation. Would I be able to conquer the evil urge to keep it? Or would the evil urge overcome me and make me take what belongs to another? I do not know. But if God strengthened me against the evil inclination, I would give the money back to the owner." "You are wise indeed," said the rabbi.

Why did the rabbi call the first man a fool? Because that man did not really understand himself. He presumed he would be strong enough to resist the temptation to keep the money. People don't fall because they are weak. They fall because they think they are strong.

The rabbi called the second man a scoundrel because, without, any qualms of conscience, he was prepared to keep what didn't belong to him. For him, temptation is an opportunity to enrich himself at someone else's expense.

The rabbi praised the third man. What made this man wise was that he knew that he was weak like anyone else. He hoped that when faced with the temptation to keep the money, he would be strong enough to do the right thing. But he knew that to do so, he needed help from God, and was willing to seek that help.

All of us are weak and prone to evil. This may be a disturbing fact. But it is dangerous to ignore it. The problem for most of us is our failure to know ourselves, to recognize the weakness within and to deal with it. But there is a kind of comfort and freedom in knowing and accepting this humbling truth. We have within us conflicting impulses, so that doing good is always possible, but rarely easy.

We may think that it was easy for Jesus to resist temptation. After all, he was the Son of God. We may think he did not feel hunger and was not attracted by earthly power and glory. Being human, he felt the pangs of temptation as we do. The temptations of Jesus are those of every person: To live for material things alone, whether food or drink, money and the fine things it can buy. How many succumb to this. To seek power, authority and control over others for no reason but to make ourselves important. To seek one's own glory and the acclaim of others, instead of worshipping God alone.

Jesus did not overcome the temptations of the devil on his own. Having spent forty days in the desert, he was at his weakest. It was the power of God within him, because of his complete

dedication to the will of God. The devil was defeated on this occasion, but would be back, as the gospel says, “at an opportune time.” Some of us believe we should reach a stage where we are beyond temptation. Jesus never reached that stage while on earth. Nor did any of the saints. For us, temptation to sin is an ever-present reality that targets our weaknesses. It can be overcome not by our own efforts but only by the power of God. We must depend not on ourselves, nor anything else on earth, but on God alone.

During this season of Lent, we are called to examine our lives and to understand more deeply the ways that sin enters our lives. When we repent and seek Christ’s forgiveness, we acknowledge our weakness and our need to be filled with the power of God. If we worship God alone and serve only him, Jesus is present. Where Jesus is at work, the power of evil cannot reign.

As we spend time with God at this Mass, we are strengthened by the Word that we hear and the Eucharist that we share. Let us always understand that our true strength is not our own, but lies in the power of God within us.