

First Sunday of Lent – Year C
(Feb. 29, 2004)

Why did Jesus go out into the desert? I suppose the simple answer to that question is because the Spirit led him out, the same Spirit with which he was so intimately united. But there is much more to it than that. The Spirit had something in mind. Remember the context in which this incident occurs. Jesus had just been baptized. He is alone and he is praying and while praying he hears the voice of the Father saying, “This is my son, my beloved. On him my favor rests.” Now Jesus knows his scripture well enough to be able to recognize the prophet Isaiah in that statement, and what God had said about a servant, a servant who would suffer and who would be the Messiah. Jesus is led by the Spirit into the desert so that he can pray and ponder what that revelation means to him. In his humanity he must find the strength and courage to do what the Father is asking him to do.

More than that. Luke has already let us know that Jesus is part of a people and that his humanity is deeply embedded in the history of that people, Israel. Now the most significant moment in that history was the liberation of the Jewish people from bondage in Egypt. For forty days Jesus symbolically relives the forty years of wandering of his ancestors in the desert. Like them he experienced hardships and temptation. But he overcame them all. He was tempted to self-interest, to personal profit and to power. And he rejected them all by relying on the word of God. He will obey and worship and serve the Father and the Father alone.

It is significant that just at the moment when Jesus goes out to pray about his mission of winning the world back to God, he is subjected to these severe temptations. He is confronted by the reality of evil. And a major part of his mission will be to combat the forces of evil in our world. And perhaps this is where Jesus’ desert experience meets us today as we begin our Lenten journey. Lent for us means conversion, repentance, and reconciliation, which is to say that we are called upon to join in the work of healing the wounds of sin and division. It would be wonderful if Jesus had completed this work in his lifetime, but he didn’t. He left quite a bit for the apostles to do, and down through the ages that same mission has been

passed on to each and every one of us. Christians today have different notions of the sources of evil in our world. Some people want to put the blame on a highly personal devil or Satan and somehow slough off full responsibility for the negative elements of our culture. As early as the time of the first Christians, Saint James, who wrote the Letter of James in our New Testament, said that the problem was our selfishness and our wrong desires. That seems closer to the mark to me. But however we describe it there remains the mystery of evil, an undoubted reality, seducing individuals, infecting whole groups, even nations. Some people recognize principalities and powers in the form of organized evil, deeply embedded in the structures of society. And because we are all confronted by these structures we cannot simply sit back and say, "It has nothing to do with me." That is simply not true. It has everything to do with all of us.

We may read in our papers or see on television stories about homelessness on the streets of Washington or violence breaking out at teen-age parties where there are alcohol and drugs, or chaos, vandalism and homicide on the streets, and without even giving it a second thought say to ourselves, "Why don't they do something about it," then turn the page or switch the channel to something more pleasant. The questions, dear friends, is, "Why don't *we* do something about it?" because whether we like it or not and whether we want to admit it or not, it does concern us. It has something to do with us.

Our reluctance to get involved may stem from an understandable fear or reticence or from the very temptations that Jesus experienced in the desert: self-interest, personal profit, and power. But remember Jesus overcame them, and with the help of God so can we.

A particular instance of evil in our time became even more appalling just two days ago with the release of the John Jay report on clerical sexual abuse. Like any instance of evil in our world it affects all of us in some way or another. I will not say more about it now since you have already heard so much about it and since you will hear a letter on this subject from Cardinal McCarrick at the end of Mass. Beyond that, Robert Bennett, chairman of the committee that drew up the report will be speaking in the theatre of the school at 10:15 next Sunday. In the meantime we must all pray: pray for understanding and compassion for the abused, for those

accused of abuse, and also for the bishops who bear so great a responsibility in this horrendous situation.