

Fighting the Wild Beasts

Gen. 9: 8-15; 1 Ptr 3: 18-22; Mk. 1: 12-15

In the Gospel for the First Sunday of Lent, we read that, shortly after His baptism, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness surrounded by wild beasts and being tempted by the devil. The circumstances greatly favoured the devil. Jesus was alone and He was physically and mentally weakened by fasting and abstinence. And yet, Jesus triumphed.

Jesus' battle with Satan mirrors the struggles with temptation that each one of us face at every moment of every day. Life on earth is a struggle with temptation. The devil works constantly tempting us to sin and to drive us farther away from God.

St. Augustine reflected on the temptations that we face as follows:

Our pilgrimage on earth cannot be exempt from trial. We progress by means of trial. No one knows himself except through trial, or receives a crown except after victory, or strives except against an enemy or temptations.

Our whole life is filled with temptations to sin from birth until death. We cannot avoid it. Our whole life is spent in a 'wilderness' surrounded by 'wild beasts.' But St. Augustine explains that by enduring trials and overcoming them, we will gain the prize of victory. So, rather than trying to avoid temptations, we should embrace them as trials; as ways of testing ourselves. Rather than trying to avoid the unavoidable, we should use temptation as a means of progressing and developing ourselves by overcoming them.

In a traditional Japanese martial art such as judo or karate, there is a lot of bowing that takes place before a match. But the final bow that a contestant makes is to his opponent. Why bow to the opponent? Certainly, it is a sign of respect. But it is more than that. The bow to the opponent signifies that, without the opponent, there could be no contest. No learning or progression could occur. We need an opponent to test us; to subject us to trial; to help us learn new skills and learn about ourselves.

If we think of an Olympic athlete or concert pianist, people who have reached the highest levels in their field, these people have undergone long periods of trial. They have spent many years training, often alone and in the desert, so to speak. They have trained not only to develop their skills and endurance but also to learn about themselves; their strengths and weaknesses. Also, they have had to conquer temptations to quit or to accept something less than the best.

And so it should be with us during this Lenten period. We should think of this time not just as a period of sacrifice and inconvenience. If we do only that, we would miss the point. We should use this period for conversion and growth. We need to use this time to go into the wilderness and face our 'wild beasts'. Which temptation is most dangerous to me? Which one am I most scared of? By confronting our temptations, we test ourselves. Through trial, we progress.

After examining our strengths and weaknesses and, recognizing our limitations and powerlessness in the face of temptation, we need to place ourselves totally in the hands of God. Let us turn to Him for help to fight off our 'wild beasts' so that we too may wear the crown of victory.