

Vulnerability opens us up to being wounded. None of us likes to be in this situation. In his human nature, like us, Jesus was vulnerable. Jesus is led into the desert. He spends forty days fasting and praying as he prepares to begin his public ministry. After forty days alone in the desert, Jesus was vulnerable, was ripe for temptation; ripe to be led where under other circumstances he might not have gone. The devil was smart, he knew how to hit Jesus where he was most vulnerable; he tried to allure him with tantalizing temptations—physically (“turn these stones into bread”); psychologically (“throw yourself down”, the quest for power); spiritually (“all will be yours if you bow down to me”; giving someone or something the supreme relationship in life that belongs to God alone; the Original Sin of Adam and Eve in today’s first reading).

Today’s Gospel teaches us that temptation comes when we, too, are most vulnerable. Like for Jesus, it is essentially an enticement to put our own desires and needs first; do what is best for ourselves at the moment; give in to our impulses without considering the consequences. It’s thinking of ourselves first; the same message we heard last weekend in the God/mammon metaphor. Resisting temptation is a matter of resisting self-centeredness. Like Jesus we must choose surrendering ourselves to God who alone should be the center of our lives. This is the first principle of living a spirituality and lifestyle of stewardship. Any other choice is the choice of a false god. Given our vulnerability, how can we resist the pull of temptation, to false worship, to sin? How can we start or continue to grow to be more like Jesus?

The answer is found at the beginning of today’s Gospel story. While in the desert Jesus fasted and prayed. Two of the traditional practices of Lent are fasting and prayer. Fasting, is about choosing one value over others, and giving it priority in my life through setting aside time in my schedule and/or engaging in whatever discipline is necessary to help me achieve my goal. Abstinence, giving up eating something, not playing computer games, is a physical discipline that usually accompanies fasting, but is not its essence. Abstinence is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

For Jesus, fasting was intertwined with prayer. Prayer is initiating and/or deepening a personal relationship with God. People in this relationship live consciously every moment in the realization of the presence of God dwelling within them and consequently think, decide, speak and act out of this relationship. While saying prayers is a part of a life of prayer, it is not its essence. Like abstinence, reciting prayers is a disciplinary practice, a means to an end. Engaging in various forms of public and private prayer practices should lead us to becoming people of prayer. It was through fasting and prayer that Jesus resisted the devil's enticements in his moments of vulnerability in the desert, throughout his ministry and in his dying moments on the cross.

This weekend you will receive a pamphlet listing various opportunities for living a spirituality of prayer as a steward/disciple. As we begin Lent, I invite all of us, to a stewardship of fasting and prayer by carving time in our schedules to begin, or deepen, our relationship to God through Jesus by choosing one or more of the prayer suggestions given not just for Lent, but continuing after Lent ends. As a way to begin, or add, to forming a life of prayer, I want to suggest a couple of books that may be helpful. This Lent I am reading: "*Open Mind, Faithful Heart. Reflections on Following Jesus*"; by Pope Francis. I'd also commend to you his exhortation "*The Joy of the Gospel*". You may want to also consider reading Section IV of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, a wonderful meditation on the Lord's Prayer, or Section I which covers each article of the "Apostles Creed" in preparation for the renewal of our baptismal promises at Easter. Information on how you can obtain copies of these resources is in this weekend's Bulletin.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI reminds us: "Christian life demands ...daily fidelity to the Gospel, the courage to let Christ grow within us and let him be the one who guides our thought and actions. This can happen in our life only if we have a solid relationship with God. Prayer is not time wasted; it does not take us away from our activities. ...Only if we have a faithful, constant, and trusting life of prayer will God himself give us the ability and strength to live happily and serenely, to surmount difficulties, and to witness courageously to him."