

Homily for the 1st Sunday in Lent 2022 Year C

“Thou shall not put the Lord thy God to the test”.

What on earth do those words mean?

Having just listened to the story of the Temptations of Christ, how on earth could you or I even begin to tempt God? What could we offer or propose to Him that is not already His?

Isn't real life very much a one-sided affair? It is very much God who puts us to the test time and time again, when life hits us with pain, loss, or suffering, we cry out to God, often in the silence of our hearts. We ask “why”, or “why me”, or “why are you doing this to me”, or “why are you allowing this to happen”, or even, “why are you putting me to the test”?

We know, by bitter experience, that there are sometimes no clear answers to those questions. When we engage in this questioning of God it is then that we are putting God to the test.

Now we have just heard Christ, prohibit that. Is that fair? Does he really mean that we can never question God or the will of God? Why did God endow us with intelligence if he did not mean us to use it?

I think that what it means is this, that we must certainly use our intelligence and question and probe and ask questions of God; that is what the dialogue of prayer is all about. But we must never forget that there is and always must be a proper relationship between Creator and creature.

To make God more accessible to ourselves, we tend to fashion Him into our own image and likeness, and that is fine if it helps. But what we forget is that that is not what God is, it is simply our idea or picture of Him.

God is the Creator of vast universes; of all that exists. It is beyond our capacity to imagine or understand Him. The mind and the reason of God's mind are, for the most part, beyond us this side of eternity. What Christ is telling us is that it is inappropriate for the creature to test the Creator. It is out of order. We may ask the questions, but when they have been asked, the correct attitude between us and God, between creature and Creator is of loving trust.

Sometimes, when we engage in this dialogue with God, when we pray without thinking too much about it, our prayers are inappropriate. When we do not get the answers we want, we are puzzled, hurt and even angry with God. But God cannot answer some of our prayers; the fault does not lie with Him, but with us. If what we pray for is inappropriate we then put God to the test. An example of this is those three temptations of Christ.

In the first temptation, He is asked to turn stone into bread.

We too often ask God, unthinkingly, for the impossible, and God cannot do the impossible. In the laws of nature, the chemical components of bread and stone are totally different and must be respected. God cannot do the logically impossible. He cannot turn a circle into a square. So, when sickness or death threatens us or those we love, our instinctive reaction is to pray for a cure. With very rare exceptions, God does not suspend or contradict the laws and rhythms of nature that He has built into His creation and our prayers are not answered. God simply does not see death as the terrible thing that we do. Just as our lives are His gift to us, so too are our deaths. They are not the end, just a change in how we experience existence.

In the second temptation He is asked to throw himself off the temple and God wouldn't allow him to be hurt.

We should not put God to the test by asking for the gimmickry or the magical in our prayers. Just because we trust in His love for us, that does not mean that God will necessarily be provoked into interventions on our behalf in order to prove that love. The laws of nature persist; if I throw myself off somewhere high, I will get hurt. I must learn to understand the laws of nature, respect them, and live within them.

In the third temptation he is asked to “worship me and I will give you the Kingdom of the World”.

You cannot bargain with God in prayer. What can you offer that is not already His? Do this for me and I will do that for you. It is easy to misuse prayer and it is inappropriate to put God to the test.

If we think a little more carefully about what we pray for, then we will not fall into the trap of putting God to the test. If we ask for the wrong things in our prayers they will not be answered.

A wiseman, reflecting on the long life of prayer and the experience, sometimes of answered prayer, wrote as follows:

“I asked for health that I might do greater things; I was given infirmity that I might do better things.

I asked for riches, that I might be happy; I was given poverty, that I might be wise.

I asked for power that I might have the praise of men; I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.

I asked for all things that I might enjoy life; I was given life that I might enjoy all things.

I got nothing that I asked for but everything, despite myself.

My unspoken prayers were answered.

I am, among all men, most richly blessed”.