

**THE FIRST (1ST) SUNDAY OF LENT
YEAR C**

No Man is Born Perpendicular

To more fully appreciate the temptations of Jesus, we need to see how all other humans are tempted, and then see how much applies to Jesus. We have splits in our personalities. Better put, we are inconsistent: inconsistent in our thinking, inconsistent in our behavior, inconsistent in following Christ. Admitting oneself is inconsistent may be the first step to self-awareness and the beginning of any thoroughgoing examination of conscience. The division in the human psyche goes all the way back to something that began *originally* in our prehistory. We are fractured selves. The split is between essence and action: between what we are and what we do.

Since our essence and our actions are not the same thing, our actions can never fully express our essence. We are always too far or too near, too soft or too hard, too kind or too firm. We are maddeningly, unavoidably inconsistent. Even if we combine a whole lifetime of billions of actions, they never amount to our essence, they can never totally express who we really are: for good or for evil.

Thus, we cannot totally forgive without a residue of rancor. We can never completely rejoice without a hint of sadness. We cannot entirely applaud another's success without a trace of envy. We cannot completely love another without a pocket of self-love. No matter how hard we try to *do* what we *are*, there is always a remainder left over: always an inelegant repeating decimal of inconsistency characterizing us.

It was different for Jesus. Because his divinity completely informed his humanity, his personality was whole, his personhood undivided. He did exactly what he was; he was totally what he did. The Oriental mandate, "When you eat a fig, eat a fig." Now that doesn't sound too profound to us, and might sound a little ridiculous, but maybe that's because we are not seamless

enough to appreciate it. Jesus, himself seamless, embodied that Oriental saying. When you and I eat a fig, we wonder where it came from, whether it is organic, how many calories are in it, and what's for supper. But Jesus put his whole being into devouring a fig or in cursing a fig tree.

When Jesus forgave, he did so without stint, as God forgives. Jesus did not just rejoice, he was joy. He did not just show mercy, he was mercy. He did not say, "I will show you the way," he said, "I am the way." He did not say, "I will tell you the truth," he said, "I am the truth." He did not say, "I will show you how to live," he said, "I am life. He once even said simply, "I AM;" not, "I am strong or good or kind or wonderful or even everything: he said, "I just am."

And since each action expressed his essence, every temptation of Jesus was critical. Each time he chose anything at all, his whole being was on the line.

The temptation to turn stones to bread was not about bread. He would later multiply bread at will and even change bread into his body. This temptation was about the human condition. Led there by his own Holy Spirit, Jesus had purposely set himself in the desert: in the barest, minimal conditions for survival. Having done so, would he now hedge his gamble, or wait for the Father to decide whether the Son would live or starve to death? And that was symptomatic of a deeper temptation. Before accepting the conditions of the desert, he had accepted the whole human condition in all its wonder and agony. Would he now endure it to the end or ask for a divine dispensation?

The temptation to worship Satan in return for all the kingdoms was a false dilemma. The kingdoms belonged to his Father, so Jesus could have had them anytime he wished. Indeed, he has them now as Paul told the churches, "The God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavens, far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion, and every name that is named not only in this age

but also in the one to come: He put all things beneath his feet and gave him as head over all things” (Eph 1:17, 20-22). But that would come later. The temptation in the desert was about compromising the unfolding of the plan of God, was about exchanging heaven in heaven for heaven on earth. Jesus knew that the meek would inherit the land of heaven, but not this particular plot of ground; he knew that the weak lose, that the strong triumph, that the children of darkness are wiser than the children of light. Would he accept the hard facts of life on earth or would he make things easier for himself and his people by rearranging reality?

The temptation for Jesus to throw himself from the parapet of the Temple is the most subtle, and so most devious of the three. We are not to put God to the test (Lk 4:12). When a lover demands, “Prove that you love me,” love is dead at the core. Love cannot survive the virus of doubt. Even if the beloved proves true, the lover has betrayed a basic mistrust that cannot be undone. Jesus was repulsed at the very thought of a sign, and called those who demanded a sign an “evil generation” (Lk 11:29).

Our temptations are less dramatic and less consequential – not only because there is nothing new under the sun and we are not very original sinners – but mainly because we cannot totally commit ourselves to good or to evil. We are split in personality, fractured in psyche, and thus, inconsistent in thought, word, and deed. But ... to the extent that in rare graced moments our actions do express our essence, our sordid temptations can be traced to the universalizing temptations of Jesus. Regarding the first, do we accept our human condition in all its ramifications or do we deny our human condition as something to be overcome? The second, do we think good ends justify evil means? And the third, do we doubt God’s personal providence for us, his determination to clasp us to his heart forever?

“No man is born perpendicular, though many are born upright” (E.B. White, *The New Yorker*, 1956). “The spirit can be right, even if the performance is limited” (Bishop James Edward Walsh, M.M.).

Father Mark S. Summers

Pastor, St. Agatha Catholic Church