

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT, C
BEWARE OF THE FLESH AND ITS DESIRES

"If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to turn into a loaf. But Jesus answered, Scripture says: 'Man does not live on bread alone'" (Luke 4: 3-4).

The Tinder Swindler: A couple of days ago, a friend of mine introduced me to a movie that is trending on Netflix and other movie outlets, *The Tinder Swindler*. It is a documentary, which means it tells a true story. In this documentary a young man, Simon Leviev, with attractive looks, like the "Apple of Eden," faked his identity as the son of an Israeli diamond billionaire with mouth-watering wealth of unimaginable proportions. Posted his branded image on Tinder (a social media dating site) and was able to swindle and defraud three ladies of enormous sums of money. Through very smart and cunning schemes (like the old serpent), he was able to use the funds from one lady on another sponsoring expensive trips and lodging in luxurious hotels, with lavished cuisines. Like the old Eve, these women fell for their lusts, a handsome man that was "good to eat" (pleasure), "pleasing to the eye" (possession) and "desirable for the good (power). These are the weaknesses of our generation. A generation that extols the external, investing in packaging and fake life. The Readings of today, First Sunday of Lent, invites us to reflect on these lusts and cautions us, drawing from the lessons of Jesus, to seek for something greater than "bread."

Forty Days of Lent: Is it forty days from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday? If you take a count, it will be more – 47 days to be specific. Sundays are not counted among the days of Lent because every Sunday, including the Sundays in Lent, are celebrated as the day of the Lord's Resurrection. We do not fast nor mourn. This Season of forty days offers us the unique privilege of withdrawing into the inner "desert" of ourselves to assess our relationship with God and with our neighbours (and with ourselves) through prayerful reflection, mortification, and charitable acts towards the needy. They are forty days during which we prepare to encounter the divine in the mystery of the Lord's Passion and death. As it was for Moses before the Covenant was ratified at Sinai (Ex. 24: 18) and for Elijah before he heard God's voice at Horeb (1 Kings 9: 1-21). These are also forty days during which we are expected to make intercessions for ourselves and for others, like Moses did for the people of Israel (Deut. 9: 18, 25). The forty days of Lent reminds us of two major events in Christian history as reflected in the First Reading (Duet. 26: 4-10) and in the Gospel (Luke 4: 1-13). The forty years' journey of deliverance of the Israelites from the land of Egypt, a land bondage and slavery, to the promised land, a land of freedom; and the forty days fasting and temptations of Jesus in the desert. These two events are very much connected to our lives as Christians and intrinsically related to this season of

Lent. For, like in those two events, we have the number “forty” to embark on a spiritual journey. The years through the desert were of historic journey of deliverance for the Jews. Jesus, having become man, took upon Himself our sins, and had to spend forty days in intensive prayers and fasting to be ready to deliver humanity from slavery to freedom. On our part, we are offered these forty days now, to be able to overcome the sins, that have enslaved us. Thirdly, the forty years in the desert was a period of testing the faith of the Israelites in the God of their fathers; the forty days of Jesus in the desert was a time of temptation, as St. Luke narrates: “Jesus ... was led by the Spirit through the wilderness, being tempted by the devil for forty days (Luke 4: 2). Our forty days will certainly not be different. Therefore, the Church always presents us with the story of the Temptation of Jesus on every First Sunday of Lent, so that we know that when we set out on a journey of personal salvation, the devil is also on a mission for our personal destruction. He will constantly whisper to confuse and distract us. We are offered the example of Jesus so that we can learn from our Master how to overcome the enemy, when he comes with his trickeries.

St. Luke narrates the three temptations of Jesus a bit differently from Matthew. While Matthew’s narrative gives the impression that the devil only started tempting Jesus after the fasting (and when He was hungry) Luke clearly leads us to understand that the temptation was an ongoing thing throughout the entire time. Secondly, both Matthew and Luke agree on the first temptation, but the second and the third are altered: the second of Matthew is the third for Luke, and Matthew’s third is Luke’s second. Whereas this has nothing to do with the authenticity of any of these narratives, Luke’s arrangement is very insightful, as it parallels the three reasons for the fall of Adam in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3: 1ff). The Genesis narrative says: “The fruit was good for food (food) and pleasing to the eye (eye), and also desirable for gaining wisdom” (power) (Genesis 3: 6). These point to what theologians call the “Triple Concupiscence” or the “Triple Lust” – the lust of the flesh, lust of the eye, and lust for power. The devil first asks Jesus to turn the stone into bread (food), then shows Jesus the kingdom of the world (eye/possession) and finally asks Jesus to jump from the pinnacle of the temple unhurt (power). So invariably, Luke is proving the fact that what the devil conquered and took away from the old Adam, Jesus, the New Adam, has now conquered in the devil and restored it to us. That is, the power to overcome the devil.

The Lust of the Flesh: “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to turn into a loaf”: No one would go forty days and nights without food and not be hungry. Jesus was hungry during His fasting. So, food became a need for Jesus. The devil will always use the things we need, the things we want, the things we love, the

things we have a flair for, things that we could easily fall for to tempt us. The Tinder Swindler knew the desires of the women. He knew exactly what the ladies would easily fall for. He flaunted them, got them attracted and exploited them. Jesus overcomes the devil by pointing to a greater or higher need. There is always something greater than our immediate needs; something higher than what is offered. Truly, "Man does not live on bread alone." When a man lives for the immediate and the now, there is a greater probability he would fall. Let us not be ruled by our stomachs and other comforts.

The Lust of the Eye/Possession: "The devil showed Him in a moment of time all the kingdoms of the world and said to Him, 'I will give You all this power and the glory of these kingdoms, for it has been committed/given to me and I give it to anyone I choose': The eye is naturally attracted to beauty, glamour and things that glitter. The mind easily desires these things and seeks to possess them. The sight of the "kingdoms of the world" and the proposed ownership could cause any man to fall. No one gives what is not his own. Does the devil own the world? In John 12: 31 and 14: 30, Jesus describes the devil as "the prince of this world." By the fall of Adam to the temptation of Satan in Eden, Satan gained authority over the world and its allurements, but not without God's supremacy (notice the phrase "... for it has been committed/given to me ..."). Thus, God still retains the supreme authority. Worldly attractions are easily misleading as its comforts often give a false sense of security. This was the mistake of the Tinder Swindler ladies. They thought Simon Leviev was true, that he owned everything. How wrong they were! Beware of falling a prey to such flashy and deceitful offers. Our earthly possessions should help us to worship God, who created and gives us all that we have. Rightly Jesus answered the devil: "You must worship the Lord your God and serve Him alone."

The Lust for Power: "Then the devil led Him to Jerusalem and made Him stand on the parapet of the Temple. 'If You are the Son of God' he said to Him 'throw Yourself down from here, for Scripture says: He will put His angels in charge of You, to guard You, and again, They will hold you up in their hands in case You hurt your foot against a stone':" This temptation was to dissuade Jesus from the path of humility and obedience to the will of the Father, which was the Way of the Cross. There is that innate desire in man to be proud, to show off, to tinkle the desire for power, popularity, and firm. Most people love the show, to be the cynosure of the public eye. The Tinder Swindler had it all. With his attractive looks, wealth, and lavished lifestyle, he was the man of the moment. He had power at the tip of his fingers. No wonder the women could crawl and did his bids so blindly that they could empty their hard-earned lifesavings without a second thought. The devil wanted Jesus to go the easy route, the way of the

world. But the was not the way of Jesus, His way was the Cross. And so, Jesus answered, "It has been said: 'You must not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

My dear friends, I love you to keep in mind that the Season of Lent is also a season of temptation. The more desire holiness, the more the devil seeks our downfall. The aim of the devil in every temptation is always to sabotage our efforts to be close to God. Just as he lured Adam to disobey God and sever that bond, so he continues to lure us even now. During this Season of Lent, the Church offers us the true remedies: for the desires of the flesh, we are to fast; for the desire for possession, we are to give alms; and for the inclination to pride, we are to pray. May this season be a season of God's amazing grace on us all. Amen.