

Reciting Confessions and Resisting Temptations

1st Sunday of Lent – Cycle C – 10 March 2019

Readings: Deut 26:4-10; Rom 10:8-13; Lk 4:1-13

“Be with me, O Lord, in my distress” (Ps 91)

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. When you see ‘confessions’ in the title, you’re likely to think about the ‘sacrament of reconciliation’ that almost all Catholics earlier called ‘confession’. However, the focus today is neither on penance nor on the confession of sins, but on the ‘confession of *faith*’ – stressing ‘*Who*’ God really is and ‘*who*’ we truly are. The first reading from the Book of Deuteronomy describes the ritual prescribed by Moses for the annual feast of the harvest thanksgiving. The people once settled in the Promised Land are exhorted to express their gratitude to the God who brought them out of the Egyptian slavery by working mighty signs and wonders. They are instructed to offer a basket of first fruits of the trees and of the harvested crop to God, the Creator and the Giver of everything good. With the offering, the people must publicly recite a ‘confession of faith’ describing the divine deeds which they concretely experienced in the vicissitudes of their history.
2. The purpose of any ‘confession of faith’ is to remind every individual and the entire community that God is alive and active in history: “*A wandering Aramean was my father ... went down to Egypt ... Egyptians treated us harshly ... We cried to God ... the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.*” Obviously, these details trace the ups and downs of Israel’s history from the time of Abraham—who came from Aram in Mesopotamia—to Jacob and his twelve sons, especially Joseph. Then, from the slavery in Egypt through the Exodus under the leadership of Moses, and final settlement in the Promised Land. The select first fruits and produce of the harvest are but outward signs of God’s benevolence and blessings. God really does not require any ‘confession of faith’ from human beings. However, the praise and worship of God with this annual commemoration serves to make the people aware of their progress from being a ‘non-people’ to being ‘God’s people’—thanks to God’s fidelity despite their failings.
3. Is there a ‘confession of faith’ in the Gospel passage? Yes, there is! Jesus makes an implicit confession of faith in God by denouncing Satan and laying bare his snares. Jesus must’ve certainly been tempted time and again during his lifetime to please the crowd, seek popularity, earn applause and avoid the Cross. However, he is firmly faithful to God’s plan for him, thereby constantly making a ‘confession of faith’ that he will follow and be faithful to God, and no one else. One can interpret the three temptations with the help of three P’s: (a) Possessions – to have ‘bread’ (b) Power – to worship ‘insolent might’ and (c) Popularity/Pleasure – to make easy options. Jesus says a resolute “No!” to Satan and an irrevocable “Yes!” to God. Today’s gospel passage ends with “The devil left him to return *at the appointed time.*” This ‘appointed time’ will come at the passion (22:3) and Jesus will once again make a costly confession of faith before Pilate that will lead to his passion and death on the Cross.

Linking the 2nd Reading with the theme of ‘confession of faith’:

In the second reading we have a ‘confession of faith’ corresponding to the confession in the first reading from Deuteronomy. From chapters 9-11 of the Letter to the Romans, Paul bemoans the fact that the Israelites—i.e., the Jews of his time—have rejected Jesus as the Messiah and continue with a ritualistic, legalistic, Law-driven, mentality. By contrast, Paul urges his people to make a God-centered confession of faith in Jesus as Saviour, Lord and Messiah. This confession of faith that “Jesus is Lord” was to be made by catechumens before Baptism. Such simple confessions were the raw materials from which creeds like the ‘Apostles Creed’ grew. Paul makes a distinction between “confess with your *lips*” and “believe in your *heart*”. The former is needed, but it is not enough. True confessions of faith are made from the depths of one’s *heart*!

The Psalm (91) reinforces the theme of temptations: and pleads, “*Be with me, O Lord, in my distress!*”. The devil also quotes scripture! Satan does so in Jesus’ third temptation in today’s gospel, which is traditionally read on the first Sunday of Lent. The devil misapplies the promise of angelic assistance, and verses 14-15 correct it. Only those who set their love upon God can expect God to deliver them. Jesus, more than anyone else, set his hope and love upon *Abba*, his Father. Thus, God delivers him from the death of the cross to the glory of the resurrection.

Insight from **Tradition** – Pope Benedict XVI writes in his book ‘Jesus of Nazareth’: [p.28]

At the heart of all temptations is the act of pushing God aside because we perceive God as secondary, if not actually superfluous and annoying, in comparison with all the apparently far more urgent matters that fill our lives. Constructing a world by our own lights, without reference to God, building on our own foundation; refusing to acknowledge the reality of anything beyond the political and material, while setting God aside as an illusion – that is the temptation that threatens us in many varied forms.

Three Current Concerns: Jesus’ temptations are not only personal but also symbolic of the temptations of Israel, as well as representative of the temptations that you and I face, today.

The Craze for Possessions: ‘Bread’ can be understood as symbolizing *economics*. Have we—as Indian Christians and Church in India—“too much bread” in terms of land, buildings, other assets and money? Do we need so much? Are we ready to share our ‘bread’?

The Crises of Power: A great concern today is clericalism and abuse of power at many levels—especially the abuse of priestly power. ‘Mountain’ and ‘bowing down’ could symbolize the *social* and *political* power. Do we not, as Christians and Church, enjoy great power and exert widespread influence over people? Here is a challenge – on the one hand, the Indian Church must increasingly play a prophetic role in society, and on the other, it must seek to subvert structures of domination. Beware! Our churches, schools, centres and institutions could become ‘kingdoms’ wherein we hunger for power and bow to idols.

The Craving for the Popular and the Pleasurable: The Temple temptation could be understood as symbolizing the sphere of *religion* and *culture*. Jerusalem was the centre of religion with its magnificent temple. ‘Scripture scholar’ Satan quotes today’s psalm (91:11-12) to lure Jesus into his trap. The psalm cited here is connected with the Temple; to pray in it is to hope for protection in the Temple. Do we give in to quick-fix solutions, popular appeal, the pleasurable and false protectionism rather than seek protection from God alone? Let us loudly confess: “Begone, Satan! for, I put my faith in God. And, God alone!” [End]