

Once four priests were spending a couple of days at a cabin on a golf retreat. In the evening they decided to tell each other their biggest temptation sitting in front of a log fire. The first priest said, "Well, it's kind of embarrassing, but my big temptation was I nearly bought a copy of the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition. My temptation is worse," said the second priest. "It's gambling. One Saturday instead of preparing my sermon I almost went to the race track to bet on the ponies." "Mine is worse still," said the third priest. "I had two big glasses of red and ran out, so I thought about breaking into the sacramental wine." The fourth priest was quiet. "Brothers, I hate to say this," he said, "but my temptation is worst of all. I love to gossip - and if you guys will excuse me, I'd like to make a few phone calls!"

The "Whiskey Priest" lived in Southern Mexico. The time was the 1920s; the Cristero Rebellion was underway. The Whiskey Priest was not perfect — far from it. He drank too much; he had fathered a child. In those days, the Mexican government said that it was illegal to practice the priesthood, but that did not stop the Whiskey Priest. Everything he did; the Masses, baptisms, funerals, and weddings had to be conducted in secret, staying one step ahead of the authorities.

The Federales and their commanding lieutenant represented the government. This band of soldiers possessed the power. It was their job to find the Whiskey Priest, to stop his activity, and ultimately to eliminate him. The hunt went from town to town, village to village. In one village the lieutenant knew the Whiskey Priest had been present, yet the residents would say nothing. The lieutenant was more persuasive; he selected five villagers at random, lined them up in the town square and shot them in order to loosen the tongues of the others.

The Whiskey Priest was living on borrowed time; he knew this to be true. He continued to move from town to town. The Federales would win, however, it was just a matter of time. In the end he was found, tried, convicted, and executed — a common criminal to the government but a martyr and a hero to the people he served.

British novelist Graham Greene's epic tale, *The Power and the Glory* describes the conflict between broken, sinful, and incomplete humanity, symbolised by the Whiskey Priest, that seeks the glory of God, and the power, wealth, and prestige of the world, characterised by the Federales. On this first Sunday in Lent, our gospel describes a similar struggle — the kingdom of God versus the kingdom of the world.

After his baptism in the River Jordan, Jesus goes to the desert and there experiences his own personal Lent. His forty days in the desert served to prepare him for the most important phase of his life, his public ministry. Thus, Jesus is tempted by the three great sins for all human history — power, wealth, and prestige. Satan is strong and insistent in his words, but Jesus is stronger and wins the confrontation.

The first great temptation is to gain power. After his forty-day fast in the desert, Matthew tells us that Jesus was hungry. Thus, Satan appeals to the physical dimension of Jesus' character to satisfy his hunger: "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to turn into bread." The devil's challenge seems reasonable under the circumstances, but Jesus turns the tables on Satan and responds, citing the scriptures, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes

from the mouth of God.” Jesus is able to forego the desire of power and to rise above the temptation.

The second temptation is prestige. Satan takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple, the most sacred place in all Judaism, to make his plea. Satan realises that Jesus is an important person. His prestige is so great that the heavenly host of angels will not allow any harm to come to Jesus. Thus, he chides the Lord, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, and on their hands they will bear you up, so you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” Jesus is above the fray again. He knows who he is and does not need the recognition suggested by Satan. Knowing he is God is sufficient prestige for Jesus. The prestige that the world claims is so important — namely having people see and recognise your importance — is of no significance for the Lord.

The last great temptation is wealth. Satan takes Jesus to a high mountain and displays before him all the kingdoms of the earth and says, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” The irony of the temptation is significant since Satan offers Jesus what he already possesses. All things are from God and, thus, all belongs to God; Satan controls nothing. Jesus responds in what must have been an exasperated tone of voice: “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” Jesus already possesses all that he needs. Whatever Satan can offer is of no value, for it is already his.

Saint Matthew’s version of the temptation in the desert is his way to show his readers that any route to the kingdom of God cannot bypass Jesus, yet temptation lurks around every corner. As we celebrate this first Sunday in Lent we must ask ourselves the question, where do we stand, with God or the world? Concerning power — does the desire for power consume us? If we have power do we use it for personal gain or for the betterment of all? Is power a thing of value and a necessity, or can we live without it? With regard to prestige, do we do things so others will notice? Do we use our position to dominate others? Or, do we seek the glory of God and not concern ourselves with what society might think? With respect to wealth, are we seeking to outdistance our neighbour by what we have? Is money the item around which our world revolves? Is it the solution to all our problems or is it simply a means to an end in the consumer-driven society of contemporary Australian life? In short, have power, prestige, and money become the gods to which we pay homage?

We are often tempted by material things, opportunities, and possibilities of contemporary life — items that we generally know will only lead us away from God. The choice to avoid such temptations is ours and, thus, we must be wary of their allure. A Native American Cherokee folk tale describes this problem well: One day an old rattlesnake asks a passing young boy to carry him to the mountain top to see one last sunset before he dies. The boy was hesitant, but the rattlesnake promised not to bite him in exchange for the ride. The young man protested, “No. I have been forewarned about your kind. You are a rattlesnake. If I pick you up you will bite me and I might die.” But the snake answered, “Not so. I will treat you differently. If you do this for me, you will be special to me, I will not harm you, and you will receive whatever you want.” On that concession, the boy carried the snake to the top of the mountain where they watched the sunset together. Upon carrying the snake back down to the valley floor, the boy prepares him a meal and a bed for the night. In the morning the snake asks: “Please little boy, will you take me back to my home now? It is time for me to leave this world, and I would like to be at my home now.” The little boy felt he had been safe all this time and the snake had kept his word, so he would take it home as asked. He carefully picked up the snake, took it close to his chest, and carried him back to the woods, to his

home to die. Just before he laid the rattlesnake down, the rattlesnake turned and bit him in the chest. The little boy cried out and threw the snake upon the ground. “Mr. Snake, why did you do that? Now I will surely die!” The rattlesnake looked up at him and grinned: “You knew what I was when you picked me up.”

Sometimes we rationalise our actions as well. A comical, but illustrative, story shows us how adept we are at this practice: A very overweight man decided that it was time to shed a few pounds. He went on a new diet and took it seriously. He even changed his usual driving route to the office in order to avoid his favourite bakery. One morning, however, he arrived at the office carrying a large, sugar coated dough-nut. His office mates roundly chided him, but he only smiled, shrugged his shoulders and said, “What could I do? This is a very special dough-nut. This morning, out of my forced habit, I accidentally drove by my favourite bakery. There in the window were trays of the most delicious goodies. I felt that it was no accident that I happened to pass by, so I prayed, ‘Lord, if you really want me to have one of these delicious dough-nuts, let me find a parking place in front of the bakery.’ Sure enough, on the ninth trip around the block, there it was!”

Temptation is strong, but we must be stronger. We should not tempt fate and we should not rationalise our actions. We need to ask ourselves a fundamental question: Will we stand on the side of the broken and sinful human, the Whiskey Priest, who seeks the glory of God or will we seek the allure of power, wealth, and prestige, cave into temptation and rationalise our actions, like the Federales? God, as Saint Paul reminds us, calls us always to seek the higher realms. Now, our response is awaited.

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