

# prayer fasting LENT almsgiving

*a reflection on*

2018

## *Vocation in the context of Lent*

*Brother Stanislaus Campbell, FSC*

The Gospel passage for the First Sunday of Lent depicts Jesus in the wilderness, tempted by Satan. This year we hear St. Mark's very brief version of this event (Mark 1:12-13).

The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert, and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him. After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."

If we look at St. Matthew's and St. Luke's versions (Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13), we get a fuller description of it. From Luke we learn that this experience of Jesus followed closely on his baptism in the Jordan River by St. John the Baptist, and so it preceded the beginning of Jesus' preaching and healing ministry in Galilee. The temptations Jesus experiences are extraordinary—turning stone into bread, adoring Satan in order to gain power and authority, jumping from the pinnacle of the temple without getting harmed.

A little reflection on these can suggest that Jesus was experiencing in these temptations various ways in which he could fulfill his vocation as messiah, as the one sent by God to teach and to heal. He rejected all of them—being a wonder-working messiah, becoming a messiah by worshiping a false god, fulfilling a messianic vocation by undertaking a reckless action, trusting that God through the ministry of angels would ultimately save him.

How Jesus rejected these temptations is seen in his reliance on the word of God. He had a quotation from the Scriptures for every one of the three. His readiness to quote the Scriptures suggests that he was deeply immersed in them and used them in his prayer throughout the forty days in the wilderness. The fact that all three of the evangelists say that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness suggests that a major occupation of his time there was prayer. He rejected the temptations also through his fasting, his refraining not only from food and drink, but many other ordinary, self-serving supports in his normal life in order to focus on his prayer and consider how he would fulfill his messianic vocation of teaching and healing which was ahead of him.

The three major activities of the Lenten Season, prayer, fasting and almsgiving, are thus present in the narratives of Jesus' stay in the wilderness before beginning his public ministry. The almsgiving, regarded as self-giving to enrich others, was fulfilled in his public ministry but certainly planned in his desert experience by his consideration of how he would fulfill that ministry, not by great and self-centered displays of wonder-working as the temptations were suggesting, but by following his Father's will and humbly and lovingly serving others.

Although Jesus' vocational discernment in his desert experience is different in many respects from that of ourselves, the fundamental actions in which he engaged throughout that experience (prayer, fasting and almsgiving—at least preparation for the latter) are actions not only for all of us in the Lenten Season, but also activities especially for those engaged in vocational discernment.

Prayer, based on hearing and pondering God's word to us in the Scriptures, enables us to hear what God is calling us to do.

Fasting, understood as refraining from unnecessary self-centered activity, enables us to engage in selfless generosity towards others and to open ourselves to God more profoundly in prayer.

Almsgiving, viewed as loving giving and service to others, enables us to love others as ourselves and so fulfill the great commandments of love of God and love of neighbor.

Engagement in all three actions together certainly should yield clarity in the discernment of one's life-long vocation and should bring all of us so engaged to a genuinely joyful celebration of Easter.