

FOOD FOR THOUGHT for the First Sunday of Lent.

This past Sunday we heard of Jesus Temptations in the desert as the Holy Spirit lead him there, and we witness the confrontation.

Was that all there was to it or was there perhaps a more subtle lesson for us to learn, perhaps a lesson concerning need for times of solitude in our daily lives.

Here we see that solitude is the furnace where we are able to be transformed.

Without solitude we remain victims of our society and continue to be entangled in the illusions of the false self of who we think we are according to the society we live in. This was the same for the people in the time of Jesus, as it is for us now.

Jesus himself entered into this furnace.

There he was tempted with the three main compulsions of the world: to be relevant ("turn stones into loaves"), to be spectacular ("throw yourself down"), and to be powerful ("I will give you all these kingdoms"). There he affirmed God as the only source of his identity ("You must worship the Lord your God and serve him alone").

Solitude is the place of the great struggle and the great encounter is, the struggle against the compulsions of the false self, and the encounter with the loving God who offers himself as the substance of the new self.

For us to better understand the meaning of solitude, we must first reveal the ways in which the "idea of solitude" has been corrupted by our world. We say to each other that we need some solitude in our lives.

What we really are thinking of, however, is a time and a place for ourselves in which we are not bothered by other people, can think our own thoughts, express our own complaints, and do our own thing, whatever it may be.

For us, solitude most often means privacy. We have come to the dubious conviction that we all have a right to privacy.

Solitude thus becomes like a spiritual property for which we can compete on the free market of spiritual goods. But is there more? Do we also consider solitude as a station where we can recharge our batteries?

In short, we think of solitude as a place where we gather new strength to continue the ongoing competition in life.

But that is not the solitude of St. John the Baptist, of St. Anthony or St. Benedict, of Charles de Foucauld or the brothers of Taizé.

For them solitude is not a private therapeutic place. Rather, it is the place of conversion, the place where the old self dies and the new self is born, the place where the emergence of the new man and the new woman begins and grows.

Solitude is the place where I go to rid of my ladders and scaffolding: no buddies or pals to talk with, no phone calls to make, no zoom meetings to attend, no music or games to entertain, no books to distract, just me-naked, vulnerable, weak, Sinful, deprived, broken-nothing.

It is within this nothingness that I have to face in my solitude, a nothingness so dreadful that everything in me wants to run to my buddies and pals, my work, and my distractions so that I can forget my nothingness and make myself believe that I am worth something by what I have done on my own.

That is the struggle. It is the struggle to die to the false self. But this struggle is far, far beyond our own strength. Anyone who wants to fight his demons with his own weapons is a fool.

The wisdom we see coming from the desert is that the confrontation with our own frightening nothingness forces us to surrender ourselves totally and unconditionally to the Lord Jesus Christ. Alone, we cannot face "the mystery of iniquity" with impunity.

Only Christ can overcome the powers of evil.

Only in and through him can we survive the truths of our battle with the reality of solitude.

So here we might ponder further, was this the reason Jesus was lead into the desert or is there something more yet to discover?

The something more is, that we may know the way in which we need to go and be properly prepared to become disciples.

As disciples we too must enter into solitude, first of all to meet our Lord and to be with him and him alone. Our primary task in our desert, therefore, is not to pay undue attention to the many faces which assail us, but to keep the eyes of our mind and heart on him who is our divine savior.

As we come to realize that it is not we who live, but Christ who lives in us, that he is our true self, we can slowly let our compulsions melt away and begin to experience the freedom of the children of God each day.

What does all of this mean for us in our daily life?

Even when we are not called to the monastic life, or do not have the physical constitution to survive the rigors of a large desert yet, we are still responsible for our own solitude. Precisely because our secular culture offers us so very few spiritual disciplines, we have to develop our own.

We must make our own desert of solitude where we can withdraw every day, shake off our compulsions, and dwell in the gentle healing presence of our Lord.

Without such a desert we will lose our own soul while preaching the gospel to others by the way we are living. But with such a spiritual abode, we will become increasingly conformed to him in whose Name we are disciples.

The very first thing we need to do is set apart a time and a place to be with God and him alone.

The concrete shape of this discipline of solitude will be different for each person depending on individual character, but no matter its shape, we can all find 1 hour a day no matter how busy or exhausted we are to slip into our desert place.

Even if it's broken up, perhaps, 15 min in the morning 15 min during a break and 15 min at lunch and 15 min before you go to bed and close out the day.

I know that I spend time on frivolous distractions each day, and must curtail them to go to my desert. Even if only a small desert that takes 15 min to cross it's a good starting point, a good first step towards Jesus.

It is after all Lent, perhaps a few of these distractions would be something to give up, and then fill them with time in the desert to meet with Jesus.

So take time to ponder this as the season of Lent again leads us to the desert with Jesus and the stark realities of our sinful nature, that we may receive His mercy and healing as we call out to Him and walk with Him in a more meaningful relationship that we can carry on to and beyond this Lenten season.

Jesus is waiting in the desert for each of us no matter how big or small.

Deacon Hicks