

“This organized religion” Luke 4:1-13

And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry. The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.” And Jesus answered him, “It is written, “Man shall not live by bread alone.”” And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, “To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” And Jesus answered him, “It is written, “You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.”” And he took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you,” and “On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.”” And Jesus answered him, “It is said, “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.”” And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Isn't this interesting how the Holy Spirit in His wisdom has guided the Church to come up with something that at first may seem strange, but once understood, it not just makes sense, it leads us to amazement and wonder.

I am talking about how the Holy Spirit has organized our Christian life in the Church, in the family of Christ. It may seem strange that people as people, but every Sunday these Christians all around the world for already thousands of years come together, and instead of having fun with friends or family, or just sleeping in, or doing something useful, they participate in their strange rituals.

They read that old book and use phrases from that old book, they say things together, they pray together, sing together and they even give away their money – voluntarily [!], and they kneel like beggars to receive little pieces of bread and a sip of wine. And it seems that many of them really enjoy and value it.

Isn't it strange – this organized Christian religion? But all of that, once understood, cause amazement of how wonderfully God has organized His interaction with us. First, the Creator of the Universe, whom we could never find on our own, comes to us, to reveal Himself.

He reveals Himself in unbelievably humble a way. He comes as one of us, putting His divine glory and power aside. And it makes sense. We are human creatures, and to communicate with us, God becomes like us in Jesus from Nazareth. And when Jesus' unusual mission – life-death-resurrection – is over, He Himself, God in our flesh provides guidelines for what we are to do from now on. He has organized our time. Six days you shall work and on the seventh you shall rest. Now entire world lives according this rhythm.

Then He organizes the structure of our day of rest. It is very simple. He invites us to be with Him, so that we can rest in His presence. So that He can come and be among us, so that He can bless us by His presence, so that our God could speak to us and to provide for our most important needs.

It was Jesus, who commanded His chosen apostles to make disciples from all nations. It was Jesus who commanded to teach, and for us – to learn, everything that He has commanded, and what we have now received in the Bible.

It was Jesus, who Himself left for us the greatest of His gifts, the Holy Supper and commanded to receive it according to His instructions. And those were His chosen disciples, Jesus' apostles who guided by the Holy Spirit began to organize our Christian worship life as we have it today.

God Himself provides this structure for our Christian life, so that He could be among us and bless us. With our Sunday services, with readings from the Scripture, with select men, chosen and called, explaining God's message to us, with prayers and with God's own holy meal as the pinnacle of our services.

More, we can see great wisdom also in how our Church year is organized. Every Sunday we have different readings so that every year we can reflect on the most important works and words of our God. Our Father in heaven cares for us, and we are indeed blessed if we can see and appreciate His provision for us.

And now we are in the season of Lent, that part of the Church year, when we reflect on what Jesus, the Son of God, true God and true man, was ready to do and experience for us. Today we read about Jesus' temptations.

Every reading from the Scripture is important for us, whatever strange it may appear to outsiders. And not only because we believe that all Scripture is breathed out by God..." (2Ti 3:16) We also believe that as we listen and reflect of the Word of God, the Triune God Himself speaks to us, and as He speaks, the Holy Spirit comes and takes home in our hearts.

He then opens and renews our minds so that we can understand who our God is, what He has done and prepared for us, and what it means for our lives today in our particular situations.

For example, today, the temptations of Jesus. What is the point to read and to reflect on this event again and again every year? Sometimes even well-meaning Christians misunderstand it. We may look at Jesus as an example for us.

How? Jesus was tempted, and we are tempted. Jesus quoted from the Scripture and the devil went away, so we too can find the right quotes and perhaps drive the devil away and stand firm in all temptations.

Most likely this event wasn't recorded as a manual for dealing with the devil. Rather it reveals what Jesus has done. What He has done on behalf of and for us. The last Sunday we spoke about God as the greatest of artists, who paints

His master-pieces in history, using times and places, nations and rulers. We can see and appreciate His artistry again in our today's reflections. There is amazing similarity between what happened with the nation of Israel and with Jesus.

Israel was called "God's son" (Ex 4:22). Israel was baptized in the waters of the sea, and then led into the wilderness for forty years, where they were tested. And we know how terribly they failed. They were constantly grumbling about food, even as the Lord provided for them.

Moses left for a few days, and right away they created the golden calf to worship, and similar worship of idols happened again and again during their time in the wilderness. Instead of trusting their God, who so mightily had displayed His power, they tested Him, whether He was actually able to help them (Ex 17:7). Israel as God's son failed terribly.

But here we have Jesus. And remember, that the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted right after His ... yes, right after Jesus' baptism. Jesus too had just heard the voice from heaven and those extremely important words: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:22)

Then the Spirit leads Him into the wilderness, where Jesus is tempted. Jesus is the perfect Son of His Father, and as the perfect Son He is perfectly obedient to the Father's will. No temptation can push Him off His course, no temptation can make Him disobey His Father's will.

He endures all temptations and comes out victorious. And this is such a comforting thing for us. As you know too well, we all are tempted. Perhaps each of us with different temptations. Sometimes we recognize them, sometimes we don't even notice them. But as Christians we know that we are not alone.

For we don't have a god, who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Therefore we can approach Him with confidence so that we may receive His mercy and grace to help us in every time of need. (Heb 4:15-16)

However, there are also things we can learn from how Jesus was tempted. Remember, Jesus was tempted right after ... His baptism. In our baptism we are united with Jesus, and we have received the same Spirit that dwelled with Jesus.

And we also have received the same identity as Jesus. We are children of God, sons and daughters of our Father in heaven. When we say "children", it is not about our maturity, it describes our incredible status, – you are members of the divine family, heirs of God's Kingdom, co-heirs with Jesus Christ.

And this is where the focus was in Jesus' temptations. Identity. And this is where the devil tempts Christians. Remember, two of temptations begun with "if you are the Son of God, then ...". And this is how we as Christians are tempted by the devil. He challenges our identity as God's children. How?

First, he may cause us to doubt our identity. “If you are indeed a child of God, why are you so sick, why do you have such a hard life, why doesn’t God shelter you from all difficulties, why did you lose your loved ones, why do you need to suffer injustice... why all of that if you are a child of God?”

Or he may urge us to misuse our identity. “If you are a child of God, then God accepts and loves you as you are. He won’t be angry with you, you can do whatever you want. If He loves you, He would like you to do exactly what your heart desires. Perhaps your God Himself gave you these desires.

If you indeed are a child of God, you should be free to live as it pleases you, no more fear or restrictions, no more commands or conditions, just be who you are, He wouldn’t demand your obedience like some tyrant.”

The devil attacks our most important identity – a child of God. And this is where we should learn from Jesus. He fully trusted the Father and was fully obedient to Him, not because everything was well and peaceful around Him, but because He trusted the words which He had heard in His baptism. These words helped Him to trust and these words helped Him to be perfectly obedient.

The same words God the Father has spoken to you in your baptism. “You are my beloved child, with you I am well pleased”. We don’t need to doubt the Father’s love if we suffer because of our sin or sins of others, or brokenness of this world. Our Father continually assures us of His commitment to us, and when our years in the wilderness of this age are over, He will bring us home.

And we don’t need to misuse our identity, we can learn from Jesus to be obedient to our Father even as Jesus Himself was obedient. For that is our Father’s will that gives shape and form to our Christian life. That is our Father’s wisdom that helps us to lead blessed lives and be a blessing to many. Remember, “if you love me, you will ... keep my commandments.”

Just a quick few words on the other temptation, – to worship other gods. Did you notice that this temptation begins with the condition – “*if* you worship me, *then* I will give you ... whatever your heart desires.”

“If only you turn away from true God, if only you reject Him and act against His will, then ... I will give you more.” The thing is, that the devil never keeps his promises. For essentially those are not promises, but temptations.

Our God on the other hand treats us so differently. He created us, He provides for us, He protects and guards us. He has redeemed us so that we may be His own and live with Him in everlasting blessedness.

He Himself calls us by the Gospel and enlightens us with His gifts, forgives us our sins and will raise us to give us everlasting life with Christ. Are there any conditions to His grace? No!

We only need to be willing to receive it. And when we are willing to receive God's gifts, the entire Trinity journeys with us. The Father provides His blueprint for our lives. The Son, who knows every temptation that we may befall upon us and He can sympathize with us, He accompanies us.

And the Holy Spirit dwells with us and strengthens us so that we can endure till the end and receive the Kingdom that is prepared for us from before the foundation of the world.

It is amazing and wonderful how our God cares for us and how He has organized everything for our benefit. The Scripture, the Divine Service, the Church year, the servants of the Word. Everything for His children, for you.

It is amazing when we see it as it is.

I pray that our gracious God lead us through all temptations and help us to see how amazingly organized His gracious provision for us is. And may He enable us to respond with obedience and gratitude as it fits our true identity – beloved sons and daughters of God the Father.

Amen.