

## Homily for the First Sunday of Lent, 2018

February 17-18, 2018

I am going to connect the readings we just heard to the horrors from South Florida earlier this week. I have two things to say:

First, we must remember that we live not just in the visible world of things we see around us, but also in the invisible one Paul refers to as the “angels, authorities, and powers.” We would use abstract nouns for them, but the reality is the same: We are influenced, as individuals and as a society, by forces that are more than material – although they have very material effects. In Florida we saw not just bullets and bodies but the cowardice of politicians who have feared to create sensible gun regulation; the greed of the gun manufacturers who have flooded the country with weapons for which there is no reasonable use; the indifference and callousness of a society that abandoned a young man to an aimless and ultimately destructive life because it let him get lost in his suffering, and (to be honest) the indifference of too many adults to the issue of violence in our society when we choose for whom to vote. These are not just personal weaknesses, although they certainly are that: they are also doors by which we humans allow cosmic, spiritual powers into the material world to do their evil work. As Saint Paul says in another place, *We are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.* [Eph. 6:12, RSV]

We also saw in Florida benign and helpful powers: the – call it legitimately superhuman - courage, even heroism, of teachers, coaches, and students; and we now see the resolve of those students and others who are determined that this horror will not be forgotten like so many others. The “better angels of our nature” are, we believe, in fact “angels” who sometimes work through human beings for good.

Second, the readings tell us that by his cross and resurrection Christ has been placed by the Father at the head of all of these powers, making them subject to him. By baptism we are joined to Christ and commissioned to live as if the victory He guarantees has already been accomplished – as much as we see each day that the world is still far from completely redeemed.

Christ’s death and resurrection is a commitment by God to us: He will not fail to bring about the new world Christ preaches: “This is the time of fulfillment.” And our baptism is a commitment by us to God: That we will cooperate with His desire to purify us, as he purified Christ in the desert, so that we will see clearly what is to be done each moment to bring God’s new world into visibility, through acts of charity and justice and forgiveness and courage and hope. That we will judge wisely and courageously in how to act, putting aside selfishness so that we do not cooperate with the powers of evil, giving them no opening to harm us or others; and that we will act generously to encourage hope and courage in others, to allow God and His angels to work through us to build a saner world.

Our seeing must penetrate the cultural blinders that resist knowing that violence is a spiritual problem at root, urged on by Powers that do not have human well-being as their

goal. And those Powers work through our inattention, our weakness, and our self-centeredness. This past Wednesday we saw those Powers work their evil in the tragic confusion of a young man; and we saw them work their evil in the more culpable self-interest and willful blindness and greed of politicians, gun manufacturers, and other people who are not self-aware enough to understand the havoc they unleash, or else do not care unless it affects them.

The Gospel of Jesus' time in the desert reminds us of the lifelong work of purification and enlightenment without which we cannot be effective sharers in Christ's work, without which we may allow the entrance of evil into our lives, our families, and our society. Lent is meant to be our yearly time in the desert, so that we might see more clearly and act more wisely and courageously in doing the work to which Christ has called us. That we might guard more carefully against the possibility that we allow by our choices the entrance of evil.

Following Christ is not about fleeing this world, with all its tragedies; following Christ is a commitment to working with Christ each day to renew His Father's good creation, to turn it right-side up again. Tragedies like the shooting in Florida cannot be addressed only on the level of the materialist fix. As Jesus was tempted by Satan in the desert, our struggle is a spiritual one: to see, judge, and act as Christ would have us, at each moment. Success is guaranteed, even if a long way off. The Powers of evil have been overcome; there is reason for confident hope.