

“Alibis” (Homily)

Deacon John Fulton, St. Kevin Roman Catholic Church, Warwick, Rhode Island  
March 5, 2017 – First Sunday of Lent (Lectionary: 22; ROM 5:12-19; MT 4:1-11)

---

For just as through the disobedience of the one man  
the many were made sinners,  
so, through the obedience of the one,  
the many will be made righteous.

Romans 5:19

“Alibis!”

Her voice rang out in the night.

“Alibis!”

There it was again! But where was she? And where was I?

Slowly, I became oriented... My own bed, my wife sleeping soundly beside me, not a sound, not a stir—the peace of a late winter’s night—and I wide awake now, feeling my heart racing, as it had raced so long ago, when I first heard that eloquent cry of accusation, disgust, and sadness.

“Alibis!” It took me way back—to elementary school—and an incident I will never forget.

My fifth-grade teacher had left the classroom to speak with our Principal, leaving the class in charge of Walter, our class president. Walt was my friend, but he was a no-nonsense sort, and so, when I did something dumb, he sent me out into the hall to await our teacher’s return. I went peaceably, knowing that resistance was futile. Like I said, Walt was a no-nonsense sort.

Out in the hall I waited, and sweated, and squirmed with anxiety, thinking of what I would say to Miss Bradley. My mind raced with excuses, trying each one, to see if it *might* counter Walt’s pending accusation. Perhaps *this* one. (No! It didn’t fit.) Perhaps *that* one. (No! It didn’t work.) As I wracked my brain, Miss Bradley saw me from the door of the Principal’s Office, down a flight of stairs. I didn’t hear much of what she said at that distance, but I *did* hear two words, spoken *very* clearly, as she looked *directly* at me. “*Self-control!*” It was then that I knew I was in for it—I mean *in for it!* Miss Bradley, you see, was a *big* proponent of self-control.

Up the stairs she came, her sturdy black pumps beating out the remaining seconds of my life... Desperately, I attempted to think of *something, anything* that might exonerate me. She reached the top of the stairs, and stood directly in front of me.

“John,” she said very firmly. “I am *very* disappointed in you. *Tell me what you did.*”

I caught my breath and said, “I tripped Russell.” That *was* the unvarnished truth, and I should have stopped *right there*, but I didn’t. I continued with the best excuse I could muster in the moment.

“I just couldn’t resist the temptation.”

And *that* is when I first heard that clarion-like cry: “Alibis! ... *Alibis!*”

“*Oh, John.*” She paused for effect. “Do you know what an *alibi* is?”

“No, Miss Bradley.”

“*Well*, then, let me *tell* you. An *alibi* is an *excuse*, a *flimsy* excuse for doing something you *shouldn't* have done, like tripping Russell, or for *not* doing something you *should* have done, like showing some *self-control*. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Miss Bradley.”

“*A man owns up to his wrongs. A man doesn't use alibis.*” I looked down at the linoleum floor.

“John,” she said, in softer voice, “You *could* have resisted the temptation to trip Russell—yes?”

“Yes, Miss Bradley.”

“Good,” she said, “Now, get back to class, and *no more alibis!*”

I turned and entered the classroom, a sadder but wiser young man.

Never again, until several nights ago, did I hear that terse accusation—and clearly directed at me. “Why? Why now?” I wondered. And as I pondered this question in the darkness, I realized that I had been praying over today's Gospel, and as I had done so, I had recalled an old “take” on the temptation of the Lord—a *point of view*, an *opinion*—that I had *first* heard back in my college days—but repeatedly *since*. Perhaps you know it? It goes like this:

“*Of course, Jesus resisted Satan's temptations! Jesus is true God! Please don't expect the same from me! I'm just human!*” (Sound familiar?)

Well, having lost sleep over this old saw, I resolved to evaluate it, right then and there, in the middle of the night, turning to Bible and Catechism. And here is what I concluded, in gratitude for my restlessness, for Miss Bradley's homey wisdom, and for the Lord's hand in it all:

Jesus Christ, second Person of the Holy Trinity, was true God—and *true man*. And as true man, *Jesus' temptation by Satan was real. He could have fallen.*

Otherwise, today's Gospel passage would be *meaningless*—the retelling of temptations that never were, of peril that never was. As well, the *obedience* of Jesus, a focus of today's epistle, would be *unworthy* of St. Paul's praise.

Jesus, *true man*, resisted *true temptation*, and holy Mother Church re-tells the story to encourage us to do the same. *Jesus resisted temptation as man, not God.* The Holy Spirit led Jesus into the desert, and the angels led him out, *but Satan he faced alone*, with no more help than *faith* in his Father, *hope* in his Father's promises, and *love* for his Father—and us, *all* of us. In comparison to our Lord, *we have so much more*, for the Lord, himself, saw to it, giving us his *Spirit*, his *Church*, and his *sacraments*. (If only we accept them! If only we believe!)

*Jesus, true man, resisted Satan. We can do the same, especially with our Lord's help!*

The opposite point of view—that *we can't do the same*—is just an alibi.

Gospel: MT 4:1-11

At that time Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert  
to be tempted by the devil.

He fasted for forty days and forty nights,  
and afterwards he was hungry.

The tempter approached and said to him,  
"If you are the Son of God,  
command that these stones become loaves of bread."

He said in reply,

"It is written:

One does not live on bread alone,  
but on every word that comes forth  
from the mouth of God."

Then the devil took him to the holy city,  
and made him stand on the parapet of the temple,  
and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down.

For it is written:

He will command his angels concerning you  
and with their hands they will support you,  
lest you dash your foot against a stone."

Jesus answered him,

"Again it is written,

You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test."

Then the devil took him up to a very high mountain,  
and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence,  
and he said to him, "All these I shall give to you,  
if you will prostrate yourself and worship me."

At this, Jesus said to him,

"Get away, Satan!

It is written:

The Lord, your God, shall you worship  
and him alone shall you serve."

Then the devil left him and, behold,  
angels came and ministered to him.