

First Sunday of Lent 2026 Reflection: Jesus in the Desert and the Freedom to Choose the Good

The Desert: Discerning Desires

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The desert is not first a place of punishment; it is a place of truth. In today's readings, the desert reveals what the heart truly desires when all distractions are stripped away.

In Genesis, Adam and Eve are surrounded by abundance, yet their desire becomes distorted. The serpent does not invite them to reject God outright; rather, he reframes desire. What is "good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom" slowly becomes detached from trust and obedience. Desire turns inward, seeking control rather than communion. The result is not freedom, but shame and fragmentation.

How Jesus Overcomes Temptation and Restores True Freedom

St. Paul reminds us that this pattern is not isolated. Through one act of disobedience, sin and death enter the world. Yet Paul also insists that desire does not have the final word. In Christ, a new obedience opens a path where grace overflows and life is restored. Freedom is no longer about self-assertion, but about receiving and responding to God's gift.

The Gospel places Jesus in the desert, hungry and vulnerable. Unlike Adam, Jesus does not grasp. He listens. Each temptation invites him to satisfy a legitimate desire but in a disordered way. Jesus refuses to let immediate satisfaction, spectacle, or power define his mission. He chooses trust in the Father over control of outcomes. In doing so, he reveals what true freedom looks like.

True Freedom: Choosing the Greater Good According to St. Thomas Aquinas

St. Thomas Aquinas helps us understand this inner struggle. In the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas teaches that freedom is not simply the ability to choose anything, but the capacity to choose the good. The will is free precisely because it is ordered toward the good that reason recognises as true. When our desires are disconnected from truth and love, they enslave us; when they are rightly ordered, they lead us toward beatitude. Pope Francis echoes this in *Dilexit Nos*, reminding us that:

All our actions need to be put under the "political rule" of the heart. In this way, our aggressiveness and obsessive desires will find rest in the greater good that the heart proposes and in the power of the heart to resist evil. (...) The will desires the greater good that the heart recognizes, while the imagination and emotions are themselves guided by the beating of the heart. *Dilexit Nos* 13

This teaching speaks powerfully to our moment of ecological crisis. Many of the climate decisions we face today are shaped by desires that promise comfort, growth, and security, yet often at the expense of the poor, future generations, and the Earth itself. The desire for endless consumption, polluting energy, and convenience can masquerade as progress, even as it deepens ecological and social wounds.

Reordering Our Desires for the Care of Our Common Home This Lent

Lent invites us to ask: which desires are truly shaping my choices? When we choose restraint, solidarity, or advocacy for climate justice, even at personal cost, we often experience a deeper freedom: the freedom of coherence between my faith and my actions. In this spirit, this week's Laudato Si' Goal of Adopting Sustainable Lifestyles invites us to live with sufficiency and sobriety.

Aquinas would say that such choices form us. Repeated acts shape our desires, and our desires shape who we become. This is why conversion is not only about individual morality, but about lifestyles and structures. In caring for creation, we are not adding an optional concern to our faith; we are allowing our desires to be re-educated by love.

This Lent, may the desert teach us to listen again to the heart, not as a place of impulse, but as the deep center where God calls us toward the greater good. May our desires be purified so that they lead us toward freedom, love, and responsibility for our common home.

Reflection question: Which desires shape my choices most deeply, and which ones lead me toward freedom and love?