

In recent years, Mark Wahlberg has become a well known actor; last year being featured in the true story of Fr. Stuart Long, Fr. Stu, and in a ton of other movies, such as the Fighter, which was up for an Oscar and told the real life story of the boxer, Mickey Ward. In that movie, a bit like in Fr. Stu, Mickey had to overcome temptations and adversity to become a winning fighter. And in real life, Wahlberg like all of us made some bad choices, too. He dropped out when he was 13 from school, and ran from the law and with the wrong crowd. He'd sneak out from his bedroom window, and hit the streets for late nights of boozing and brawling and stealing. In a recent interview, he points out many of his friends from his teenage years are in jail.

A positive influence though for Mark was Fr. Jim Fleeven, his parish priest. He saw a glimmer of Mark's future when before the judge, Mark was pouring it on, saying he would never act out again and that he'd turn his life around. Fr. Fleeven said the judge melted, and as Mark was walking out, he winked at his priest, and Fr. Fleeven thought to himself "you little bugger...that was an Academy Award performance." He'd later see Mark driving in his neighborhood with a stolen car, barely waving over the steering wheel. And while he might have gotten away with that, in April of 1988, an incident would occur where his crimes would turn more serious. He attacked a man with a stick, simply because he wanted the man's two cases of beer. The man eventually lost his eye. Mark was horrified, and in fact

apologized in court to the man. After that though, they put the shackles on him and sent to a 19th-century prison, the worst in Boston. At first, he thought "hey, I'm one of the guys now, I made it." But then he thought "is this what it means, to be one of the guys?" He was 5'3" and 115 pounds. And he realized he wanted more out of life. He served 45 days, and upon release, he followed his older brother into a music studio. He became a white rapper, and got a gold record with "Good Vibration," but he wanted to do something else, so when Penny Marshall, the director called him with a role for the film "Renaissance Man," he tested for it and got the role. Acting forced him to become disciplined for the first time in his life. From that point on, he'd get other roles and critical acclaim, and an Oscar nomination for "The Departed." He also became an executive producer in Hollywood, where he now produces 3 shows for HBO.

But despite all this, he hasn't lost sight of where he once was. Fr. Fleevan guided him out of the abyss, and Wahlberg says he had to make that choice to climb out and do different things with his life. Getting the break in music and then acting was great, but he knew life was about more than having a successful career. He founded a foundation to help inner city kids, and other programs. He didn't want to forget about where he came from, and wanted to give back. When interviewed, he said he starts each day at church for 15 to 20 minutes to pray. He says this brings him a clear focus on what's important, a reminder everyday of the blessings in his

life, and a reminder daily on what to focus on and stay away from. He prays to be a good servant to God, a good husband, father, a son, a friend, a brother and uncle, a good neighbor and leader to those looking up to him and a good follower. He says faith has helped him to overcome a lot of things, and that nothing comes easy, especially when you've got your back against the wall. Most recently, he started the Catholic App "Hallow" and was on national TV on Ash Wednesday where he said "Faith, it's everything, it's afforded me so many things... God didn't come to save the saints, He came to save the sinners... We want to be better version of ourselves, and through focusing my faith, it's allowed me to do that." Talking about Lent, he said: "God knows the things that he wants you to detach from... we all know those things that... make us feel guilty, don't make us feel as good as we should. So being able to detach from those things and focus on... good habits as opposed to bad habits... just challenging people to be better versions of themselves." He does it through prayer and discipline; not just during Lent, but as a way of life.

I was struck by his story because while I admire his acting, I think how he leads his life is a real testament to what all of our faith journeys need to look like. Here's a guy who could just focus on the fame and money, but as he says he needs a daily reminder of what the true blessings are in his life, and also a reminder that he is both a servant and a leader.

His story to me seems to appropriate for the Lenten Season, because all of us can have a tendency to become sidetracked like Wahlberg. Like him, growing up, we can sometimes run with the wrong crowd or lose our way. Like him, standing before a judge as a teen and putting on an act to convince the judge of something that wasn't true, we can stand before others and do the same thing, telling them what they want to hear to avoid conflict or to avoid them thinking less of us, and fall into habits of lying. And like him, we can sometimes get blinded by selfishness, which he says was happening during his brief stint as a rapper. What we all need to do is to, like Wahlberg says he did when he was in jail for the first time, ask ourselves the question "is this who I really want to be? Is this where I really want go?" For him, being in a jail cell, the answer was pretty clear-cut and it was obvious he was in a bad situation. But for the rest of us, we have to dig a little deeper and be mindful of the fact that sometimes we lose sight of the fact that we might be going down the wrong track, have our priorities messed up, or just need to make some important changes in our lives. Lent gives us the opportunity to do exactly that. For most of these things that we do that we don't want to do happen gradually over time. What we need to do is to see things right, and realize how much God loves us and how to respond to that love by confronting our sins and temptations.

In the story from Genesis, we hear of God's generosity and love in creating the garden and humanity. God does not create the tree of knowledge of good and evil to diminish us by taunting us, but rather the meaning is that there are things that belong to God and not us; namely moral truths of good and evil, right and wrong. What sin does is causes us to redefine this on our own terms. We see this in how morality is redefined such with the unborn not being seen as human by some, marriage redefined; racism where some hold some races superior to others; sexism. But individuals do this too. We justify our sin and say it doesn't hurt anybody, or it's not really that wrong to do this or that, whether it was petty theft like Wahlberg was doing as a kid, or even legal things that we do where we tell ourselves "this is OK" but inside, if we are honest, we know that we are acting contrary to God's law. So what is the remedy? A going back to the basics. A going into the desert with our Lord so we look at what needs to change in us with respect to how we may have changed.

The starting point is thinking about how much God wants life for us. You can think of the other trees in the story as the ones that fill our life with the good things God gives us; friendships; relationships; nature; a beautiful earth; animals/pets; the abundant things that fill our lives and bring them joy. As for the things we are to avoid, it's for our benefit, because what we find is the sinful things just lead to diminishment and sadness, not true happiness.

When we get to the Gospel, Jesus is tempted in the desert and traditionally we've seen these as three different kinds of things that we often get tempted with.

In the first temptation, the devil says if you are the Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread. These are the sensual things. Now of course it's not wrong to make food when hungry; rather the deeper meaning is when you make sensual desire the focus of your life. Food, sensual pleasures in a committed marriage, these are good things; but the key word is "alone"; one does not live on bread alone. For some these sensual pleasures take over; this is obvious with how people misuse cell phones, the internet, etc, and it's easy to also misuse alcohol, tobacco. So we can look at this and say is this out of control? Do I need to look at my screen time and whats on the screen? Make sure the computer is put away and there's no bad channels coming in? Making sure I'm not relying too much on alcohol? Temperance helps us to keep these things in check.

Jesus is then tempted to throw himself down off of the top of the temple. Pride and ego are easy to get out of control. Again nothing wrong with a little bit of honor; but if we are doing something just to be seen or for compliments, that's not good. Pride in a job well done is not a bad thing, or in spiritual progress. But sometimes pride can cause a person to think they don't need to listen to others or even God. It

can cause us to think the world revolves around us, so we aren't attentive to the needs of others. It's worth asking ourselves if we're willing to listen to God in prayer and the guidance of the Church in faith and morals; if we are being fair in how we treat our parents or kids and thinking of their needs; if we are open to correction from others who are there to help us; if we can admit that we may have been wrong about something or need to apologize. Pride can be a big stumbling block for spiritual growth.

Then lastly, the devil shows Jesus the kingdoms of the world and offers them to Jesus if he'll worship him. This is the temptation of power. It comes in many forms; power over other people at work or in a family; manipulating people to get our way; putting people in their place. All of us have power, but we should use it for the right reasons; to help people make better choices; to make this world a better place and to glorify God, not just ourselves.

Wahlberg like all of us had plenty of temptations and gave into them, but he wised up because he wants to be known as something more than an actor; he hopes to one day be a saint not on the silver screen but in God's kingdom. As we say at the school, God is good, all the time, and how true that is. What wonderful things He's blessed us with, because in Jesus, it is a "yes" to humanity and of how much are

loved. Jesus through His trust and obedience, shows us the way. As we prepare to receive Him, may we too reject sensualism, pride and power running amuck and embrace the way of the cross as He did - and with that, taste the fruits of eternal life.