

He Was Tested

The putting to the test of the Son of God is only possible because he became a man. It would be impossible to "tempt" the Second Person of the Trinity not to be God's Son; you couldn't "tempt" me to stop breathing, and it is similarly the nature of the Son to be obedient to God the Father. But human nature is another thing. The Gospel is telling us that, as a man, Jesus had to *decide* to be holy and obedient: the Letter to the Hebrews says "Although he was the Son, he learned to obey through suffering".

What Does Suffering Mean?

I think that when we use the word *suffering* we speak of everything that is done to us (or for us) from outside: everything we accept—blows or birthday presents, beauty or grief, hatred or generosity. A person in hospital is suffering illness: but also suffering medical care, drugs, treatment and help of all kinds. We call someone like that a *patient*, because she or he is *undergoing* rather than acting. In the same way, we could divide our whole experience into two: what we do, and what's done to us: in shorthand, *action* and *suffering*. We think action is all-important, and try to relegate suffering to the minimum. But in fact, what is done to us is far more eloquent, life-giving, and creative. We are, after all, creatures; our very being is a gift, not a personal achievement. When someone is kind enough to love us, we receive our life from them, we know we are valued and appreciated; suddenly, we experience our life as a source of wonder. We can't give that gift to ourselves. We have to wait for someone else to give it to us. That is a form of obedience. And when we wait for God the Father, in our prayer this Lent, we will be learning obedience as the man Jesus did.

God Sent His Son Into The World

....not to appear on the clouds in power and majesty, but to be like us, who are to be his brothers and sisters. So he comes and takes on the human experience. The distance from God the Father requires that he should enter the world as a child, and learn to believe in God as we all must. So no special knowledge from the manger onwards, but only a human mum and dad who believe in the Jewish faith and know the Scriptures of the Old Testament. The story in the Gospel today shows Jesus led by the Holy Spirit: but the

Holy Spirit takes him into a seriously off putting place, for a serious chunk of time. He has no food, and he enters into the experience Moses led the Israelites to endure on their way to faith. It is at the end of this long fast that the Devil turns to him and tests him. If you want to know where this dialogue was born, you must turn up the book of Deuteronomy at the beginning of your Bible, and go to chapters 6 to 8. Moses is instructing the people how they must think of their experience in the desert. Everything that passes between the Devil and Jesus is taken from this passage; read it, and you will understand what is happening to our Lord.

Lent- A Time For Suffering And Action

Because we overvalue action – we can't bear to sit still, we're awful at praying, we don't listen to one another, we don't appreciate one another, etc, etc – Lent calls us to correct our balance, and prayer and fasting both invite us to be passive – to suffer. We suffer the loneliness that can't find God, and the bitter silence of our deserted heart. We look around at our "secret room"- the personal depths we so seldom visit; and we find our hearts unkempt and messy, clogged with past sorrow, unprocessed guilt, failures and the junk of waste and contempt. Easy to turn tail and run back to the bright lights, get busy and make lots of noise, tire ourselves out with activity! Fasting too calls us to suffer the keen edge of hunger, which can deepen into the keener edge of desire, with its devil-attendant, despair. The temptation to run out for square meals and the medicine of the pub can be overwhelming; the body whispers that we'll be all right once we've eaten and drunk or spent some money or given ourselves some innocent *lift*- a hair-do, it might be, or a new toy. But the third element of Lent is the one where our feet are kept firmly grounded: kindness! What we used to call *almsgiving* is about making a gift of ourselves to someone who needs us. That can be a direct fruit of our praying, and our fasting. It is like fasting, to give up the armchair and telly, to knock on a quiet door; it is like feasting to find we can be kind to the lonely person on the other side, and be the means of lifting up someone hungry for reassurance and hope. Prayer and fasting engage our capacity to suffer. The sharing of kindness, the giving of Lenten gifts, is active holiness.

Fr Philip