

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Temptation

Lead us not into temptation, says the Lord's Prayer in our sadly inadequate translation. Yet Jesus is today said to be precisely "led our by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil". Now, we have another place where the Lord's prayer will not be answered - the Garden of Gethsemane; but surely we have here something other than a contradiction. Jesus is led to be tempted for a purpose.

Whose Testing?

I don't believe we quite grasp the word *temptation* in its Scriptural sense. We think of a kind of titillation of the emotions, which plays upon our embarrassing sensibilities; it's on the edge of humour, and there are plenty of witty sayings about temptation. In Scripture it means an awesome experience which the Latin calls *discussio* - being violently sifted, like stones in a riddle; it is an experience of being forced, smashed, and shaken through narrow spaces, a grinding-down that reduces us to our elements, as we are prepared for an entirely new use: after the riddle comes the mortar and the concrete-mixer. Who is responsible for such (better translation) *testing*? I don't think God needs it; *he knows of what we are made*, and our components, as Ash Wednesday has already reminded us, are not that impressive.

Adam and Eve

Our biblical first parents make their appearance in this first Sunday of Lent. They first heard the words, *Dust you are, to dust you will return*, and that identifies the *discussio* pretty exactly. The Church wants to remind us that they failed a "testing" in the Garden of Eden story, when Eve decided to consult her own thoughts rather than obeying the way of God. St Peter had a similar problem when he first heard of the Cross. For Peter the testing time was very hard: he was ground to fragments as he saw his plans for Jesus falling apart, and all his brave resolve worse than useless. We might conjecture that he threw his silly sword into the bushes as he fled with the others from the arrest, and that he was without it as he crept back, to watch from a safe distance the end of the story. Out of this crushed man Jesus made a real rock; perhaps our testing will do the same for us.

Jesus, New Adam, New Moses

In being tested by the devil, Jesus is holding a return match for the Garden of Eden; this time it is the man who wins. It is a shot across the devil's bows at the start of the Gospel. That is why Paul calls Jesus "a new Adam". But notice that Jesus quotes Deuteronomy to the devil. Moses' Testament, the great "book of the desert", is the source of the wisdom that defeats evil. Moses was training the people to enter the Promised Land; Jesus is in training to enter on his mission to Israel. As Israel was "tested in the wilderness" for forty years, Jesus is tested for a symbolic forty days. As Israel was tempted to return to slavery to find food, Jesus is tempted to find his own food in the world, rather than waiting on the "manna" of God's word. As Israel "put God to the test" at the waters of Meribah, Jesus is tempted to act without responsibility and force the care of God. As Israel was tempted to worship the golden calf, Jesus is asked to seek his way amid "the kingdoms of the earth and their splendour". In all these "testings" Jesus finds the words of his replies in *Deuteronomy*. It is as if Moses were reborn in him. Matthew wants us to see the failure of Adam, and the failures of Israel being slammed into reverse gear. At the end, the devil leaves him (Luke will add, "to return at the appointed time"); and we recall that this dramatized account is only the beginning of the struggle of Jesus against evil. In another Garden the agony will be most intense; and in a third, the Lord of life will be laid in an earthly tomb, to await the victory which we will all await at last. May we glimpse his power, victorious in our lives this Lent!

Fr Philip