

The First Meeting of the Lent Course 2005

The First Sunday of Lent

Ash Wednesday presented us with the Gospel of Matthew calling us to take care how we give alms, pray, and fast: the words are found in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus puts his own depth and reach onto the accepted practices of Jewish Faith and the law of Moses. We should take the point that there is no question about *whether* to include fasting, prayer and generosity in one's religious menu. Jesus' message is only about the spirit in which we approach them.

That very incarnated message is held already to have gone in at the beginning of Lent. Now we are approaching the first Sunday Liturgy, and the Church carefully arranges something different, a shift not only of tone, but of form. From religious teaching we turn to a dramatic story, the story of Jesus' Temptation in the Wilderness.

The Gospel writers are not historians marshalling facts about Jesus. It seems certain, indeed, that they had few established facts to work with, compared to the author of a modern historical biography. The Passion account was strictly kept, as the heart of the Church's message, even in historical terms; but even there the personality of the evangelist and the situation of the particular Church in which he was writing are clearly influential upon his mode of telling the story - compare John with the other three Evangelists, or Luke with the other Synoptists.

In the telling of the ministry and the teaching of Jesus, there is even less historical accuracy, as more and more the voices of preachers and early interpreters make themselves heard in the accounts. These are, remember, reports of words delivered perhaps forty to fifty years previous to the Gospels' making. They come to us laden with oral tradition, hindsight, and years of interpretation, and in no other, purer, mode.

Let us see Mark's bald telling of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. It has about it the brevity and mysteriousness of a mentioned dream: in two verses it is over:

And at once the Spirit thrust him out into the desert

And he remained there for forty days, and was put to the test by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and the angels looked after him

Far from an account of his fasting, the text says that, for forty days, Jesus did what his forefathers did for forty years: in the desert they ate the bread of angels. The Greek word for *looked after* (diekonoun) means that the angels were his deacons, and deacons as you know wait at table! The wild animals are frightening at first, until we recall that when the Messianic age dawns, *the wolf will lie down with the lamb, and they will do no harm on all my holy mountain.*

Matthew and Luke both read these mysterious words, and then they looked at a second volume which was current in the early Church, but has not come down to us. We call it "Q", and it is primarily a source of Jesus' sayings, where our text today is a narrative; but it is thought that the temptation account carries nothing in it that is foreign to the spirit of "Q" as we know it, and because Mt and Lk both use it, we are happy to call it "Q". This is actually a good place to see how it reveals itself, in that Matthew and Luke both expand the story of Jesus in the desert, in almost exactly the same way, and often in almost identical words. That could never happen by coincidence, and there is no real suggestion that Luke knew Matthew or vice-versa. In these second re-tellings of the story, both evangelists accept from "Q" a threefold testing of Jesus by *the devil* (Mark said *Satan*). Matthew also calls him *the tempter*. What does the devil tempt Jesus to do?

It is the Spirit who has led Jesus out to be tested, and who presides over his experience in the wilderness. The Spirit has allowed him to be hungry - as Deuteronomy says God made the Israelites suffer hunger. Now, Jesus is being tempted to let his *hunger* dictate his action - to break the period of his testing, to doubt the providence of the Father, to use his divine powers - which are taken as read in

the Gospel - for his own independent purposes. Until now he has acted solely on his Father's will; now he is being tempted, as a man who has fasted and is hungry, to consult his own desire. This recalls the story of Eve and the tempter in Genesis, where obedience to God is relegated in favour of the beauty of the fruit, the goodness of it, and the allure of the knowledge it could give. It is as if the big picture - God the Father testing his Son under the Spirit - is meant to give way to the immensely cogent things that are happening in Jesus' stomach.

In the drama of the Exodus, Israel, as soon as the hunger of the desert began to bite, "murmured" against God and Moses. If the devil can now cause Jesus to doubt his Father and break his perfect trust in God, he can alter the course of salvation-history. The *weakness of the moment* is of cardinal importance. We too are used to using the knowledge of particular weakness, and our particular situation, to empty our lives of moral meaning, to excuse our derelictions. Surely God does not want me to inconvenience myself to go to Mass this particular Sunday, surely God knows I am a drug addict, and cannot be subject to laws that bind others, surely God knows what a bad time I've had, and will not mind if I cut this corner, abandon this principle, take this quick way out from the fix I am in. The Gospel is telling us how much can turn on what looks like an insignificant moment.

Jesus does not fall. He quotes Scripture, to the effect that

"Food will not keep a man alive, unless God says that he will live; and if God says that he is to live, he will live, whether he has food or not!" (A. Plummer, *Matthew*, 1909).

It is not for the Son to say how the Father's will that he should live is to be accomplished. His only rôle is to give himself to "the fulfilling of all righteousness". The rest will follow in God's time. Cf "Seek the reign of God and its righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (*Mt 6: 33*).

The second test (hurling himself from the Temple) comes in Jerusalem, whether by demonic transport, or in visionary form, is unclear. Now the devil begins to quote scripture back to Jesus, ("*He has given his angels charge over you*", *Ps 91: 10*) making it seem that the act to which he tempts Jesus is willed by God, a holy idea. The image of Jesus being borne on the wings of the angels recalls the Exodus once more since Ex 19: 4 describes God as carrying Israel out of Egypt "on eagles' wings", and Dt 1: 31 describes him "continuing to support you, as a man supports his Son" on the exodus journey. But the very reverse of this trust is to "put God to the test". The question seems to be about how Jesus will use his messianic power. The answer is, "in obedience to the Father". His facing of peril - and he will face the Cross - will be as an obedient son. The miracles he will perform - and they will be abundant - will each be in obedient prayer to the Father. The Holy City will see miracles; but not yet.

Note that Jesus will not call on angelic aid in the desert. In Mt 26: 53-54 he will refuse *more than twelve legions of angels* in the Passion account. Most certainly he will not test God. Once again he distances himself from the murmuring Israel in the desert.

The third test is atop a high mountain. We recall the end of the Gospel, where Jesus meets his Eleven on a high mountain, and says *All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me*. Here he is tempted with the gift of authority over all the kingdoms of the world. But there is no short cut to this authority. It will be conceded by the Father, when the Cross has been undergone. There is no getting round the Crucifixion. The devil's offer is simple, *worship me, and they are yours*. There is no subtlety left, no scriptural warrant. It is a direct deal. But the price is disobedience to the first commandment of the Decalogue. Note that the problem is not the end, only the means; psalm 2, echoed in the Baptism story, says, *I will give you the nations as your birthright, put the ends of the earth in your possession*. But servitude to Satan is no means for the Son of God. When Jesus claims authority on the mountain at the end, his disciples will *worship him*.

Begone, Satan will recur in Mt 16: 21-23, where the Satan in question will be Peter. It is more than a verbal echo, because in both places Jesus is choosing obedience to the Father against obedience to anything less; Peter puts his aims into the picture as something less than the will of God. Anything opposed to the Cross is satanic. The injunction to worship God and serve him alone obviously evokes the Golden Calf in the exodus story, and the long battle to extirpate Baal and Astarte from Israel, and the testing of Israel during the Exile, when many Jews decided the gods of Babylon had defeated Yahweh.

It is clear that in undergoing the baptismal water and the tempting in the desert, Jesus is repeating the exodus experience. In the next incident, Calling the First Disciples, he will also establish a new Israel of Twelve (like the tribes). Jesus is thus a new Moses inaugurating a new people of God. We shall evoke this simile in the Easter Vigil, when we read the Red Sea story, and renew the vows of Baptism, in which we became the new People of God.

The defeat of devilish powers is fulfilled at all points in the Gospel of Matthew, not only here, but when Jesus casts out demons, and when Peter gives his voice to a satanic suggestion. This victory is a continuous theme of the Gospel. The story we have read today gives Christian disciples confidence in time of *peirasmōs*, and encourages to find their response to temptation in fasting, and in a profound understanding of the holy Scripture.

Accordingly, the Church's presentation to us on this first Sunday of Lent is immensely hopeful, and gives us cause to commit ourselves industriously to the disciplines of Lent, confident that the enemy is not invincible, but already exposed and vanquished.