

Into Temptation

17 2 13

Almighty God,
whose Son Jesus Christ fasted forty days in the wilderness,
and was tempted as we are, yet without sin:
give us grace to discipline ourselves
in obedience to your Spirit;
and, as you know our weakness,
so may we know your power to save.

Our text may be found in today's gospel and is Luke chapter 4 and verse 32:

**'Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit
in the wilderness where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.'**

What tempts you ? What do you find tempting ? Whatever personally you find tempting, unless it is truly attractive to you and you are seriously interested in what is tempting you, then it's not – for you that is – a temptation. So food or drink; sex or power has no power over you if you're anorexic or tea-total, chaste or feeling feeble.

Tuesday was Shrove Tuesday; Wednesday was Ash Wednesday; and today is the First Sunday of Lent. Traditionally, today, we consider the temptations of Jesus in the Wilderness. By trying to tempt Jesus, the devil was testing his resolve to be the Messiah in the way God intended him to be. It's about Jesus being obedient

to the will of God for him which, from the words he used in the Garden of Gethsemane the night he was arrested, we know he was. Jesus simply says, 'not my will but yours be done' (Luke 22 v42) but the cost for him to say so was terrible. This morning, I'd like to ask the question why each of the three temptations we've just heard in Luke's gospel had the potential to tempt Jesus.

The first is easy to see: 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' Jesus is hungry, starving, famished. He's not eaten for forty days so the devil's temptation is real and practical – have a bite to eat by using your miraculous powers to change a stone into bread ! Possible or not, later in the same gospel, Jesus was to make five loaves and two fish sufficient to feed a crowd of five thousand. The temptation here is to meet his physical need – literally to serve himself; the cost of doing so would be to abuse his power. If he did, then he would be being selfish, feeding himself when he should be feeding others.

The second doesn't work for me. Showing Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, the devil promises to give them into his power 'if you will worship me.' Jesus has come to bring all nations under the rule of God and in this simple, expedient way, he would achieve his aim. It is a utilitarian argument whereby the end justifies the means. Do something that's wrong to achieve a greater good. It's all a question of balance but there is no balance because the cost of gaining power is to subvert the very base of that power by worshipping the devil instead of worshipping God – a non-starter for anyone with half a brain let alone Jesus, the light of the world, who is, if anything, clearly bright !

The third is good to test in a spectacular way what he feels to be true. Taking him to the pinnacle of the Temple, the devil seductively says 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here for it is written 'He will command his angels concerning you to protect you' and 'On their hands they will bear you up so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.' You can see how this might get under Jesus' defence because it's all so reasonable, rooted in scripture and wouldn't everyone be ever so impressed ? But again for Jesus to do so would be to set aside his trust by a test, to use his position to show off to the crowd !

All three temptations are aimed at making Jesus take a wrong step by challenging his belief in himself as the Son of God. The real nub of the temptation is the 'If'. 'If you are the Son of God ? Well he is and he knows he is so I guess these three temptations by the devil won't work and, of course, they didn't.

But what about temptations for us ? Simply let me say temptations are real and individual. But if they have the power to pervert and destroy us, then it would be silly and foolish to give in to what tempts us. Living here in France, the wine is truly good but were our love of wine to lead us to become alcoholics, then that good would become a real evil. And that is what is at the heart of the Temptations of Jesus – good perverted by evil.

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

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