

Lent 1, 2025 – The Temptation of Christ in the Wilderness

Luke 4:1-13

What was it like to be Jesus? There is a temptation to think that it must have been to be quite unlike any one of us. It starts with fantasises about what the Nativity must have been like ‘The little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes’ – which seems distinctly unlikely. It moves on through having real difficulty with any idea that Jesus might, for example, not have known everything. St. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, believed – along with most Christians for most of Christian history – that Jesus could never, for example, have got a sum wrong. If there had been such a thing as Nazareth Primary school, Jesus did not need it: he did not need to be taught anything, he knew all things within himself already. He could have spoken French if he’d had to. He knows everything. There’s no need to struggle, to learn, to grow – He just is, perfect from the beginning. So have lots of Christians thought.

And at one level it would be easy to read today’s Gospel story as fundamentally sharing that view of Jesus. Jesus seems to drive off the Devil with ease, simply by quoting Scripture, instantly and with great self-assurance. Wouldn’t that be great? If you could chase your demons away just like that: expel your anxiety or fear or jealousy with a word? Great, and perhaps a bit of a fantasy, even for Jesus. It’s worth noticing though that even according to the story, this is just Episode 1 of Jesus’ struggle with Satan. Our reading ends with the comment that the devil departed from him ‘until an opportune time’ – which comes in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed to be spared from the cross, and his distress was such – Luke says - that his sweat fell like drops of blood to the ground. The struggle didn’t end in the wilderness. This morning’s story is but the curtain-raiser to the great contest of Jesus’ life.

So what is that contest? All the time, Jesus has to choose who he is, and who he follows. At each time, he is faced with something which seeks to lure him from the path of God's will. Whatever the something is, it can easily appear as good and positive. After all, why *not* turn the stones into bread? Hunger is not a good thing, for Jesus or for the poor – so why shouldn't being Son of God mean filling empty stomachs? Why not, as in the second temptation, take political power – at present so disastrously abused by Romans and Sadducees? Couldn't Jesus do a much better job than them of running things, of ruling things? Or why not – in the third, perhaps supreme temptation for a religious person, perhaps – risk everything with a great leap of faith, which must surely be the way to God's approval?

And then finally, in Gethsemane, the night before the Cross, why not simply choose to live? Why not sneak out of the garden and go quietly back to Galilee, to live by the lake, to grow old in peace. What will of God could it be that would shut off all other avenues and lead simply to the cross on Golgotha hill? Surely there must be another way?

So there is a contest in Jesus' life: the struggle to discern and to obey the will of the Father. His prayer in Gethsemane, 'not my will, but yours' is real, not for show: his human nature, his hopes and desires, have to be brought into line with the divine will. The human will canvasses all kinds of possibilities, all kinds of scenarios as to what it might mean to be God's Son. The divine will knows but one course, which is (as St. Paul put it once) a great self-emptying, or a great sacrifice. In the human life which is also God's life, in Christ, there is to be nothing except this great giving away of self for the sake of others. A great giving away of self which, for love, goes even into the darkness of death. Nothing – however attractive - can stand in the way of that self-giving. And Jesus needs to learn that, discover that, for himself.

So what was it like to be Jesus? Not easy, not without trials and conflict and doubt. Sometimes when the Church speaks of Christ being without sin, we seem to imply such an absence of difficulty. It is better, though, to think of it meaning that Jesus is the one who learns what being God means, until there is nothing left in him but the great self-emptying . He's the one, if you like, who not only loves, but who is Love made flesh. And that, as the Temptation story suggests, is something which does not just happen, but emerges through struggle and darkness and choice.

Being a Christian is about starting on the same journey – being worked on by God until we are like Jesus. Until there is nothing left in us but love. I've been crucified with Christ, said St. Paul in one of his more mysterious remarks. I think this is part of what he meant... I've been worked on by God till everything in me which is not love has been killed, till there's nothing left but love.

Now that might sound like incredibly hard work. How are we to make ourselves into pure love? And one of the meanings of the season of Lent is to acknowledge that hard work has its place: that our own will and action and work is not irrelevant. At some level, you choose to love, or not – and Lent is partly about disciplining ourselves to choose well.

But at a much deeper and more fundamental level, the whole Gospel is that it is not up to us. In a few moments we will pray around the altar that 'our sinful bodies may be made clean through his body, our souls washed through his perfect blood, that he may evermore live in us and we in him.' The point is that through the eucharist, his life is made our life. We are converted, made into people who belong to the one great self-emptying which is God. St. Augustine said, when the priest gives you the Eucharistic bread and says 'the body of Christ' and you say 'Amen' – you become what you receive, you say Amen to what you are. In other words, when you take the bread into yourself, Christ is taking you into Himself; just as the bread becomes you, you become Christ – become love. At this altar, He makes us his own. Deep, deep mysteries which are well worth allowing your heart, mind and soul to be overwhelmed by.

But the simple point is this: growing as a Christian is first and foremost not about trying very hard: it is about letting God do his work within you. Letting Him make you like Himself, make you one with Himself. If we each learn that a little more deeply this Lent, it will have been a holy time indeed.

Amen.