

## Lent 1

I take as my text today from St. Matthew's Gospel:

***Then was Jesus led up of the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil.***

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.*

We have now entered the solemn season of Lent, where we closely follow our Lord's journey to the Cross. This is the Season of the Church Year where we are tested and challenged to exercise our spiritual discipline through both spiritual and physical means.

On Ash Wednesday, we were reminded of our humanity as our foreheads were signed with ashes, being instructed by the readings of the Epistle and Gospel not to make a show of our fasting, not to make a show of our religion.

The Collect for Ash Wednesday, which is to be said throughout Lent, strikes at the core of our Lenten discipline. In it, we ask God to:

***Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness...***

This Collect is a most appropriate reminder for us to make our Lenten discipline more than a superficial self-denial, more than just a petty giving up of something, so that our experience of Lent is, indeed, a spiritual renewal.

As Anglicans, we know that Lent holds the potential to bring something positive into our lives as Christians. But we also know that this *positive* does not come about without an effort on our part. It does require a certain spiritual discipline, not just a physical discipline. Moreover, it must also be focused on the Divine Love of God and his Grace freely given.

Throughout the history of the Church, we have many saints to hold up as examples for ordering our lives, both spiritually and physically, the greatest example being set for us by our Lord when he spent those forty days in the wilderness in fasting and prayer to prepare for His ministry that lay ahead.

Though it is not expected that we can actually imitate the extraordinary discipline of Jesus, nor the many fine examples that followed by those who emulated our Lord, we, as Anglicans, as Catholic Christians, do often make extra-ordinary efforts out of devotion and love of our Saviour to emulate and follow his example.

However, it is during the course of Lent that we most readily focus on our spiritual lives and make those extra-ordinary efforts.

Perhaps, a good question to ask ourselves is why only during Lent?

Certainly, there are many opportunities, throughout the Church Year, for each of us to make an extra-ordinary effort at spiritual discipline, and our love for God, for Jesus Christ, in response to his unfathomable love for us, should be a catalyst for such efforts.

As we become immersed in Lent, having been reminded on Ash Wednesday of our mortality as human beings, as well as of our responsibilities to our Creator, and the seriousness of our obligations as Christians, we meet, in Scripture, one of the great realities of our worldly existence: the daily struggle in the face of an insidious and presumptuous tempter and usurper, Satan, the Devil.

In today's Gospel passage, St. Matthew tells us that Jesus was led of the spirit into the wilderness. It was right after his Baptism, right after the time when the fullness of Who he *was* was revealed to him.

This wilderness, to which Jesus was led, was a barren stretch of land on a plateau between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea, an area roughly 15 miles by 35 miles in size, and was truly desolate.

Jesus needed to be alone to prepare for the fulfilling of his call and mission. It was a time of preparation and testing. It was a time of inward struggle. And it was a time for attacks by the Devil.

When the Bible was translated into English from Greek, the word translated as *tempt* really came from a Greek word meaning *test*. It is easy to understand why *tempt* is used in the King James Version. Indeed, the devil did tempt our Lord; did try to seduce him into sinning.

However, to better understand our relationship with God in respect of *temptation*, we need to go back to the word, *test*.

One of the best examples comes from the Old Testament story, in Genesis, of Abraham being put to the *test* when God told him to take his son Isaac into the wilderness, to be offered as a sacrifice. Here, God was not *tempting* Abraham into sin but *testing* his faith and his will.

Now, clearly, Jesus was to be *tested*.

Jesus was perfectly cognizant of the popular views of the Messiah and of the expectation for an earthly king to deliver the Jewish nation from the bondage of Rome. He knew he had the power to do just that; but he also knew that the Kingdom of God is not worldly, but heavenly.

Our Lord knew that God's way of redeeming our fallen human nature was not through temporal and material means; not through the use of outward signs and coercion. That redemption, that reconciling of man to God, could come about only through an act of Divine Love.

Here, as Jesus struggles with his chosen path, the Devil launches his attack, and Jesus is put to the test.

Perhaps, this is a good place to take note of the dual Nature of Jesus, that he is both God and man. In his humanity, Jesus is subject to the flesh, indeed, capable of experiencing all the feelings, physical and spiritual, that make up our lives as the pinnacle of God's Creation and that define our human nature.

This testing of Jesus is real and revealing of his human Nature. Examples of the reality of his humanness is found throughout the Gospels with his shedding of tears, his moments of anger, his compassion, his pain so vividly shown in those last hours leading up to his Death on the Cross.

When Jesus took upon himself our flesh, he as accepted our human frailty, which he overcame.

Now the Devil, Satan, the Evil One is fully aware of this as he puts Jesus to the test.

First, the Devil entices Jesus to turn the stones into bread to satisfy his physical hunger. The barren landscape was strewn with stones that closely resembled loaves of bread, and for the Son of God, this would be an easy task. But Jesus rebuked the Devil, saying that man must not live by bread alone, but by the word of God.

Again, the Devil approaches Jesus and issues a challenge that, if he is Who he says he is, then he should jump off the pinnacle of the Temple to prove it. If he is the Son of God, the angels will prevent him from being harmed. But Jesus replies that we should not tempt God.

Finally, the Devil tries to bribe Jesus by offering him all the earthly kingdoms if he will just worship the Devil, instead of God, to which Jesus replies that we are to worship the Lord our God, and him only.

At that point, the Devil leaves. But be assured, he will return many times during Christ's ministry to test him, to tempt him into pursuing an easier path — that easier path that, if followed, would result in the abandoning of his ultimate mission and calling, the redemption, the reconciling of all of creation to its Creator.

The temptation of our Lord in the wilderness, though specifically directed by the devil against the uniqueness of the person of Jesus, is not so different from what was directed against his disciples, his followers, and Christians throughout the ages, and us today.

Let's put the three temptations into a context to which we can more readily relate.

### **The first temptation: to turn stones into bread:**

This is the temptation to use power for selfish purposes. Here Jesus is being tempted to provide material relief to win people over, in essence, to bribe them into following him.

This would have been a denial of his mission and calling, for he would have alleviated the symptoms without removing the causes, causes that are in the human soul. He would not have redeemed our fallen nature.

We, too, are tempted to use power for selfish purposes; to use position or wealth or control to accomplish our own ends, rather than God's.

## **The second temptation: to jump off the pinnacle of the Temple:**

This is a temptation to use power for sensational purposes. Certainly, jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple and landing in the court unscathed would have gotten the people's attention; but it would not have ended there. This is one mark of false christs who gain attention by sensational actions but offer nothing of substance to their followers.

Jesus knew the futility of the sensational as a course of action.

We, too, are susceptible to falling prey to the sensational to enhance our prestige, looking for neon signs from God, rather than relying on our faith, falling into the trap of *tempting God*.

## **The third temptation: to fall down and worship the Devil:**

Our Lord was being tempted to compromise, and he certainly was not willing to compromise in the least to win followers, or to avoid the painful path he had chosen in order to redeem mankind. He knew he could not change the world by becoming like the world.

This same temptation that confronted Jesus is insidiously present in our lives today: the temptation to compromise.

Our very present challenge is not to compromise our faith. The insidiousness of *compromise* can be seen everywhere in the world, in our own country, in our communities, in the churches. It is something we Anglicans have stood up to in our own time.

Without a doubt, the three temptations our Lord faced in the wilderness directly confront us daily in our lives.

The Lenten Season offers us a time to reflect on his example and to examine our lives; to evaluate our spiritual well-being, indeed, to strengthen ourselves spiritually through a period of extra discipline.

Certainly, we find strength in knowing that Jesus took upon himself the journey to the Cross out of love. He set an example for us in the wilderness, paving the way for us who also are tested throughout our lives. He won the Victory on the Cross, defeating the Devil, sin, and death. He has shown us the way to eternal life with him. He made the way straight. Made the way straight — an archaic term that means to clear the roadway or path of any obstacles that may cause one to stumble or fall.

He is the Way; and he is Divine Love.

Our Lenten discipline, then, should be predicated foremost on love of God. All that we do should be out of love for him who first loved us, not for self-aggrandizement but out of love, purely and simply.

There are so many opportunities available to us in the Church to exercise our Christian Disciple and to selflessly serve our Lord and our God. We can imitate our Lord by the giving of ourselves in his service in love — in the spirit of Christian fellowship, with love and respect, whether as a member of the Altar Guild, as a Lay Reader, an Acolyte, a member of the Vestry — in whatever we do. It's not about us. It's about him who gave himself out of Love for us — each one of us — to reconcile us to our Heavenly Father.

It is not a matter of our keeping a Lenten discipline because it's what is expected of us; or, even, just to do something for the Parish or the Church; rather, it is a matter of our keeping a Lenten discipline in response to that Divine Love that stirs us from within.

From the stable in Bethlehem, through the wilderness along the Dead Sea, to the Cross on Calvary was a journey of love, Divine Love; a journey that led to victory over sin and death, clearing the way, making straight the highway for us in our journey through life on earth to life eternal in heaven.