

THE TEMPTATION OF CHRIST

Deuteronomy 26. 1-11

Romans 10. 8b-13

Luke 4. 1-13

I speak to you in the name † of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

In St Luke's gospel, the temptation of our Lord is placed right after his baptism, that moment when all who were present heard a voice from heaven, saying, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' Jesus' identity as the Son of God has been publicly confirmed; and before he begins his ministry, he is led by the Spirit into the wilderness.

We have heard this word 'wilderness' before. It is where the Israelites once went with Moses, and where they so often failed the tests that they were given before arriving in the Promised Land. The desert is a tough place; and it is there that Christ is led to spend forty days. Forty: the same number of days that Moses spent on Mount Sinai¹ as he wrote down the words of God's covenant; the same number of days that Elijah spent fleeing Jezebel on the way to Mount Horeb;² the same number of years that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness;³ the same number of days that we journey during Lent with our Lord towards the cross. Forty days, forty years: a time of waiting; a time of fasting; a time of preparing; a time of testing.

It is following our Lord's forty-day period of fasting in the wilderness that Satan comes to tempt⁴ Jesus. Challenging his freshly-announced identity, the devil says to

¹ Cf. Ex 24. 18.

² Cf. 1 Kings 19. 8.

³ Cf. Deut 8. 2-5.

⁴ In the New Testament, the word 'temptation' is often better translated as 'trial' or 'testing' (which is the point of the words 'Lead us not into temptation' in the Lord's Prayer). In the wilderness, Satan is tempting Jesus, but he is moreover testing him and pushing him to accept a flawed and inadequate view of his work as the bearer of God's kingdom.

the famished Christ, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’ Our Lord responds with a quote from Deuteronomy (8. 3), which in its full version states that the Israelites grumbled about their lack of food in the wilderness; but that God fed them with manna, wanting them to understand that man ‘does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord’. If Jesus makes bread for himself, he will abuse his Sonship by serving his own needs rather than depending on his Father to provide for them.

The second temptation endured by Christ is to gain power by compromise. The devil leads our Lord up and shows him all the kingdoms of the world in an instant. Satan then claims both authority over the kingdoms and the prerogative to give that authority to whomever he chooses. He offers Jesus a deal, reminiscent of the bargain offered to Faust, the character in the German legend: Worship me, and it will all be yours. Christ knows that as Son of God, he will indeed have authority over the kingdoms of the earth; but that his authority will come from God. In response to this temptation, our Lord quotes another verse from Deuteronomy (6.13, but see also 10. 20), saying, ‘It is written, “Worship the Lord our God, and serve only him”’.

The climactic scene of the third temptation occurs in Jerusalem. The devil takes Jesus up to the southeast corner of the Temple wall, its highest point above the valley below. Twice now, Christ has fended off temptations with words from Scripture, so this time Satan addresses him by citing a text from the Psalms (91. 11-12), in effect saying, ‘Did not the psalmist promise angels to bear you up so that you would not even strike your foot against a stone?’ If you are the Son of God, he challenges Christ once again, ‘throw yourself down from here’.

This time, the temptation is to put God’s promises to the test. Specifically, the devil tempts our Lord to call upon God to deliver him from death in Jerusalem. Ironically, as we all know, one day Jesus will face death in Jerusalem; and when he will do so,

he will choose not his own deliverance, but faithfulness to the Father's will. Christ's response to the devil on the pinnacle of the Temple is therefore the counterpart to his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Our Lord will fulfil his divine Sonship not by escaping death, but by accepting death and defeating it. Unlike Israel of old, Jesus refuses to put God to the test. The verse quoted by Christ from Deuteronomy (6. 16) – 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test' – is not only given as a challenge to Satan, but also as a command to which our Lord submits. And there, in this contest of duelling Bible verses, the devil is defeated. For now, at least.

The time of testing may be over, but these challenges faced by Christ in the wilderness will be followed by yet other challenges throughout his ministry. The one who tests Jesus (and us) in the wilderness will turn up again: at home, in the market place, and at work. Diabolos, the devil, will return at an opportune time, with the intention of turning us away from our calling as the children of God; and of preventing us from fully experiencing all that God desires for us.

Thus each of the verses from Deuteronomy⁵ with which our Lord wards off temptation are applicable to all of us, and not just to Jesus. Taken together, they declare that we are to make life more than just the pursuit of our physical needs; we are to worship and serve our God alone; and we are not to test God.

But we can go one step further. It is significant that Christ refutes Satan each time by quoting verses of Scripture. Our Lord does not answer using his own terms alone. He answers temptations with reminders of his relationship with God. His answers are given in terms of *that key relationship*. Jesus will have only God as his centre; and even when he is isolated in the wilderness, he will not isolate himself from God.

⁵ Deuteronomy is the book of covenant renewal for the Jews. It describes their way forward into the Promised Land after the time in the wilderness had passed. By invoking Deuteronomy so consistently, Jesus was not only recapitulating Israel's wilderness period, but was also fulfilling for all of us in new Israel the promises of joy, rest and peace that the Promised Land stood for.

For centuries, people have wondered how Christ could have not sinned or given in to the devil; in this passage, or at one of those more ‘opportune times’ to which St Luke refers. Some of us may wonder if some divine fail-safe mechanism was built into our Lord’s humanity, that would have snapped and locked into place, had Jesus’ human side so much as wavered under the searing heat of a temptation. The divine nature would have overwhelmed the human side at that point to prevent disaster.

Theologically, however, the Church has long argued against seeing things that way. The orthodox Christology that emerged from the Councils of Nicaea, Ephesus and Chalcedon insists that neither of Christ’s two natures influenced, changed or altered the other. His divinity was not watered down, and his humanity was not supercharged. His human nature did not make him less divine, and his divine nature did not make him less human. So we are left to conclude that if our Lord successfully resisted temptation his whole life long, it was because somehow, Christ as human really did summon up the power not to give in to sin and evil.

Why might this be significant? Because as we stand at the beginning of the season of Lent, we are reminded of our own mortality and sinfulness. That was the message of Ash Wednesday. As we embark on our 2016 Lenten journey we will, on repeated occasions, be faced with choices between good and evil. We will be tempted. We will be tested. The good news is that since our Lord was fully tempted as we are and never wavered, he knows better than anyone how much strength we need. And so, by his Holy Spirit, he gives it.

This Lent, let us turn to Christ, who knew what it is to be sorely tempted. May we find our inspiration and strength in him. Let us keep alert, resist the tactics of the adversary and remain steadfast in our faith. We are promised that the God of all grace will himself restore us, support us, strengthen us and establish us.⁶ Amen.

⁶ Cf. 1 Pet 5. 8-11.