

PASSING THROUGH TRIALS

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.

I wonder if you have ever heard the story of the young couple that was struggling to make ends meet after buying their first home. One day they went shopping in the main department store on the high street. The man went to the men's clothing section of the store, and the wife went to the women's section. After about thirty minutes, the wife came to meet her husband. She was carrying a bag, and in it was a light pink satin dress designed by Alexander McQueen which she had bought for £520. 'How could you do this?' the man asked. 'I saw the dress in the shop window, and then I found myself trying it on,' his wife explained. 'It was like Satan was whispering in my ear, "You look fabulous in that dress. Buy it!"' 'Well,' the husband replied, 'You know how I deal with that kind of temptation? I say, "Get behind me, Satan!"' 'I did,' replied his wife, 'but then he said, "It looks fabulous from back here, too!"'

Every year the First Sunday of Lent draws our attention to the fact that our Lord was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, and the readings alternate on a three-year cycle from the gospels of SS Matthew, Mark and Luke. This year, St Luke emphasises the role of the Spirit: Jesus was 'full of the Holy Spirit' following his baptism in the river Jordan; and was now led by that same Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

The first point that we consider, then, is that God allows his own Son to be tested. God leads Christ into the wilderness, a place of barrenness where he is made vulnerable in every way. He has been full of the Holy Spirit, but he is now emptied

of his resources and security; and it is in this condition that the devil, the tempter, finds our Lord and tests him.

All of the tests to which Jesus is put in St Luke's account can be summarised as temptations to use palpable power (one might also say force or violence) to answer a need or achieve an end. There is the temptation to use power over nature ('command this stone to become bread'); to use power over people ('to you I will give all this authority'); and to use power over God ('throw yourself down'). It is worth noting that in each of the three major temptations, the devil quotes Scripture to Christ; but our Lord knows Scripture more truly and he knows the power of God. He passes through his trials by relying only on his Father. There are no miracles; no signs or wonders; no demonstrations of palpable power; no force or violence. Jesus uses no shortcuts or circumventions. He simply perseveres to the end, and then it is over. The devil departs from him until an opportune time.

When will that opportune time be? Many times, surely, but most especially in a Garden the night Christ was betrayed and arrested, the night before his crucifixion. The result of this final Agony in the Garden is already anticipated in Luke's wilderness temptation. Our Lord will not use force to save himself, even as he sweats blood. Instead, he will go to his cross and die with the words, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit' (Lk 23. 46).

The second point that we have to consider is the fact that God allows *us* to be tested. Our trials may not be epic struggles like those of Jesus, but they do have a way of coming at an appointed time and having a shape designed to fit us. Haven't we all been there? Perhaps our 'forty days' have been the last few months; or the past year; or maybe even longer. Everything that could go wrong, it seems, has done so. Bills pile up. We are unhappy with our jobs, or with our situation. And the world around us seems to be happily headed to hell in a handbasket. Or maybe we've been through

abnormally painful personal ordeals: friendships and marriages fail; toxic family relationships demand more than we have to give; or an unexpected medical or spiritual illness zaps our strength.

It's then – when we're bone-tired, drained and mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually exhausted – at that very moment when we're starving for refreshment, the devil pops into our head with a juicy temptation. Why not just cut off that toxic family member? Why not just tell that friend that the relationship is over? Why not just call it quits entirely, walk away from the situation and refuse to look back?

The way we face (or do not face) our trials reveals what kind of person we are and what we are made of. We may not want to admit it, but we actually grow only by undergoing them. Whether our trials are fair or not (and very often they seem outrageous and unbearable), they expose our weaknesses and can be used to refine our strengths. We cannot save ourselves from these tests, but God does not ask for success as the world understands it; he asks for faithfulness, which is real success in his eyes.

How then are we to survive our times of trial? How then are we to be faithful when we are tested? The author of the epistle to the Hebrews writes that 'we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need' (5. 15-16).

We can confidently draw near to Christ, for he lives and reigns in the very 'throne of grace', where we can find grace to help in our own times of need, in our trials and our tests. And what is this grace that our Lord offers us when we are in need? Firstly, it is the knowledge that it is all right to be powerless. We do not rely on our own

strength, but rather on the strength that Jesus gives us. We persevere and continue in faith, trusting that God will defend us in all assaults of our enemies; that he will defend us by keeping us from falling into sin and running into danger; that he will order all our doings in righteousness in his sight.

Allow me to close with a very practical suggestion. When we find ourselves in the very grip of a trial or temptation; when we see that we are at the knife's edge, feeling its immediacy and power; simply pray. Pray with words, or pray even without words; and open yourself to Christ. Pray for dear life, because that is what is at stake: our life, which is under attack, or trial, or temptation, from some source either within or without. Remember that the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength (1 Cor 1. 25).

Whatever else may happen in the grip of a trial, we will have breathed out a prayer and uttered a cry of faith. You and I are united to our Lord, who is the victor in the wilderness. It may not feel like victory just then; in fact we may even feel as though we are as good as dead; but we are really living! And we are in good company.

Amen.