

## THE TEMPTATIONS OF JESUS

“And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil.” (Luke 4 1-2a)

Jesus felt the urge to withdraw from the world, and to go to a lonely place, to be by himself with God. It was a turning point in his life. He knew who he was, and probably had known for some time. He was God’s son, and God was his father in a very special way, in a quite unique way. The relationship was very special, and the words that he had heard at his baptism in the River Jordan were still ringing in his ears, “you are my beloved son and with you I am well pleased.” He knew also that he was the one who had been promised, who had been born into the world to save his people, the Jews, and to be a light to the nations of the world, He was God’s promised Messiah. His ministry to his people, to the world, was about to begin and he had to know how he was going to exercise it and what God’s will was concerning his message to the world and how it was to be carried out. He needed to be alone with God, to go deeply into the heart of the matter, and to know assuredly the spiritual resources of God. Many times, on later occasions, Jesus took his disciples apart from the world, up into the hills near Nazareth and Galilee, where he could be alone with them, get to know them and teach them the things about God.

Although he was the son of God in a special way he was also human, as one of us, knowing the frailties and weaknesses of our human nature and the ways in which a person can be tempted from the straight and narrow way, from the highest and the best, and to restore human beings in the true image which God had created them and his concern for the world in which they lived. He had to wrestle with the problems of evil, of sin and suffering, which he had observed at first-hand all around him, and to know how best to help. He needed to restore people in a right relationship with God, so that they might become God’s people, and help to bring in God’s Kingdom upon earth, so that God’s rule might begin. Being human, he experienced the natural fear of evil, of sin and suffering, which he would have to conquer and vanquish throughout his earthly life. As Scripture tells us, Jesus was without sin but tempted in all points as we are. This time of testing in the wilderness was also a time of strengthening for the rigours ahead. The temptations fall into three groups:--

1. The fear of the misuse of his gifts
2. The fear of the misuse of his power and authority
3. The fear of the misuse of his spiritual resources

Jesus was very gifted, empowered with both natural and supernatural gifts- hence the healing miracles. Jesus had great authority, not only in teaching and preaching. He had great ‘presence’- people responded to him. He could influence people. He had great spiritual resources – power from God, that he could use to benefit the human race. How were they to be used?

In the Scripture readings we are given pictures of what may have gone on in Jesus’ mind to help us to understand the meaning of the temptations. They correspond to what we term the world, the flesh and the devil. In our Services of Baptism we are asked to renounce the world, the flesh and the devil.

The first temptation refers to the flesh or rather the senses. We know that Jesus was hungry; he was often hungry throughout his life. He had great gifts; he performed miracles. There was the miracle of the feeding of the 5000. His gifts were used sparingly and with a purpose in mind. This was so that God might be glorified through his acts and that they might be in accordance with God's will. His answer to this and any onslaught on his senses was, "It is written, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God". Jesus knew the Scriptures well, the Torah (the sacred book of the Jews) and often quoted from them in times of need.

For us, our response in temptation is to 'turn to Christ'. We need only to think about the seven deadly sins to know what the temptations of the flesh are. We need the love of Christ to support us. He, only, can sympathise with us in our human weaknesses. He, only, can understand.

The second temptation refers to the world and to temporal power and authority. Jesus could have been a great national leader, but it wasn't God's way, and it wouldn't have led anywhere. How could a small community stand up against the might of the Roman Empire.. Jesus was the King of the Jews, but not a King of this world. The answer which came to him was "you shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve." Again he is quoting from Scripture. We know the temptations of worldly success, of pride in our own achievements, our secret ambitions. In everything we must turn to Christ and to his Church. As St Paul puts it, "the Church is his body in the world. He is the head and we are the members." The Church has also been described as the Bride of Christ and as a Bride is to manifest his glory.

The third temptation refers to the works of the devil, or the misuse of God's spiritual resources. The answer which came to him was, "you shall not tempt the Lord your God." Time and again the people asked for miracles. They asked for signs of proof. Jesus reproved them for their lack of faith and called them 'a perverse and unbelieving generation.' He did not want them to think of him as a wonder-worker. He wanted them to have faith in God and to grow in that faith. To test God is the opposite of trusting him. He who seeks for proof has not yet learned the meaning of faith.

There are two ways in which people are tempted along these lines:

1) By seeking some kind of evidence; by a desire for and seeking after spiritual experiences, visions, special answers to prayer or divine experiences. Sometimes these are given but to whom and on what occasion and to what purpose lies entirely within the will of God, which is different to seeking to know God's will for our own situation and seeking help from the proper channels. For most of us it is the ordinary, everyday, humdrum nature of things on a very natural plane and that is as it should be.

2) The other form of temptation along these lines is in superstition. If you do 'such and such' a thing God will reward you.

Baptism is sometimes for the parent an assurance of heavenly protection. It may be the beginning of a lifelong membership of the Church and of fellowship with

God, but it is not a certificate of guarantee. I'm reminded of a picture in the newspaper of soldiers in the front-line in the Gulf, praying in the desert and the Padre warning them, "this is not an insurance policy but to strengthen you for the forthcoming battle". In all these things we must 'turn to Christ'.

Satan – the devil – evil can be very real and especially in the spiritual realm, and often where the Church is very active in dealing with the forces of evil. We need the protection of Christ and of his Church and all its spiritual resources.

And finally a brief story of the temptations from the Gospel of St Mark.

"And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan and he was with the wild beasts and the angels ministered to him."

In the desert there roamed the leopard, the bear, the wild boar and the jackal. But Jesus was not harmed by the animals. They were his friends. Jesus was born in a stable shared with the domestic animals. We recall the passage from Isaiah which speaks of the golden age of the Messiah when enmity between man and beast would no longer exist. "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard lie down with the kid – ". There is St Francis whose life was lived so closely in imitation of that of Christ's who preached to the birds and as legend goes tamed the wolf who was terrorising the neighbourhood. Perhaps we have a foreshadowing of this in the present day concern for the preservation of our wildlife, especially for those creatures threatened with extinction and for the care and welfare of the creatures for whom the human race are responsible.

"And the angels ministered to him."

Angels are heavenly beings. They are God's messengers and operate at his command. St Luke tells us that at the time of Jesus' greatest testing in the Garden of Gethemane, an angel appeared to him, strengthening him. I am reminded of the Chapel of Christ in Gethemane in Coventry Cathedral. Central to the small altar is the Angel holding the Chalice. The screen at the entrance to the Chapel is in the form of a Crown of Thorns. "Father, if it be thy will, take this cup away from me, yet not my will but may your will be done." He had to drink this bitter cup to the dregs.

We have the Eucharist or Holy Communion which is our strength and comfort in time of need: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a sharing of the Blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a sharing of the Body of Christ? We being many are one bread, one body, for we all partake of the one Bread,"