

Lent 1
25/02/2007

Mark the Evangelist

Deuteronomy 26:1 - 11
Psalm 91
Romans 10:8b - 13
Luke 4:1 - 13

Setting our hearts on God

In Luke, the Temptation of Jesus follows the genealogy of Jesus. The genealogy is not a record of his ancestors, it reflects a theological purpose. Luke begins with Jesus and proceeds backwards to Adam, who is named "son of God". Adam was a child of God, created and called to do the will of God. Jesus is "the son of Adam and Son of God". He stands in solidarity with all humanity - with us - and is also created and called to do the will of God. There are two temptation stories in the Bible, that of Adam and that of Jesus, both of them "sons" of God. The first was unable keep his heart set on God's will, and after him many went astray. The second was able to keep his heart set on God. Because of him it was Satan who fell. We are children of Adam and, in Christ, children of God. We still experience the temptation of Adam, which is the temptation to become like God, but the point of the Gospel is that there is one who stands for - Jesus Christ. We may choose to live in the power of Christ's temptation, in which he chose to serve God, and put the tempter to flight.

At his temptation Jesus was led to the wilderness by the Spirit of God. This did not make him immune to the pressures, the deprivations and the bleakness of that experience. And it also suggests that God was on his side by seemingly being against him. His 40 days in the Wilderness was like a microcosm of Israel's 40 year journey. The question was, would he seize power to change the elements of creation to meet his own needs? Would he grasp at the political and military control over humans and live with the world at his feet? Would he force God to live up to the promise to care for his children? The three tests revolve around one point - **would Jesus allow God to be God, and accept his own destiny as a servant of God.** Would he live in the faith and trust of being a son, or choose to take the power for his own purposes?

As we see Jesus, alone in Wilderness he relies only on Scripture and the power of the Spirit. He calls on God with quotes come from Deuteronomy and, in this way he confesses faith in God. In the strength of these words he allows no other influence to hold sway. He demonstrates that his heart is truly set on God, and the Tempter departs, but is not defeated. We hear that he retires to wait for another day, which is when he enters the heart of

Judas who betrayed Jesus. And just as Jesus has been tempted three times, he is taunted three times on the Cross, and denied three times by Peter. But on the Cross it was Satan who fell.

Notice that the Tempter appears in sanctimonious guise and even quotes scripture: "If you are the Son of God... "He will give his angels charge over you..." We tend to think temptation would be easy to recognise but one of the problems is that it seems plausible and benign. The same seductive voice seeks to persuade the Church. The temptation to "worship the devil" is not to do weird things in the forest at midnight. It is the temptation to stride the corridors of power and collude with the institutions and instruments of the world's pomp and power. We may not be tempted to jump from temples but we still like to impress, and we are not averse to stunts. Vain-glory is of interest to us, as a church and as individuals, and so there is a case for being on our guard, but all is not lost.

In the gospel we read that the Spirit drove Jesus to the place of testing. It is hard to fathom, but even the work of the Tempter comes within the sovereignty of God. St Augustine said:

It is through temptation that we advance. None know themselves if they have not been tempted, nor can they be crowned unless they conquer... In Christ we were Tempted, for as Christ accepted flesh from us and gave us salvation, accepted death from us and gave us life, accepted insults from us and gave us honour, accepted temptation as one of us and gave us victory. If we were tempted in his person, in him we shall also overcome. Pay heed then to Christ's victory, no less than his temptation.

If we feel we are being put to the test, perhaps the least we could say is that we are being called to renew our sense of whose we are and who we will serve in the world. And if we find ourselves struggling with temptation perhaps it means our conscience is not blunted and we still have a choice. Times of testing may do us good if they help rediscover the things that matter.

The graphic today is based on the reading from Deuteronomy which is about a Harvest Festival. There may not seem to be much of a link between this and Lent, but today the emphasis is not on the Harvest Festival, but on the **confession of faith** the people recited on the day when they honoured God's gift of the land. When they had made it through the long journey and settled in the Promised Land, they began to recite the section which begins "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor..." It rehearses the experience of life in Egypt, the Exodus and the entry into the land. It is one

of the oldest fragments we have in the Hebrew Scriptures. In Liturgical terms, when they recited this they remembered whose they were, and who had sustained them in life. The Harvest Festival was when they re-entered the narrative of their salvation. They remembered that what came to them was to be used and enjoyed with all - including the aliens in the land. The festival was a time, therefore, when the Liturgy put them in touch with memory and history, recalling what it meant to belong to God. And it reminded them that life was not meant to be focussed on living for themselves. They were not to be embroiled in a self-devouring culture. The Harvest Festival was a time of giving, because of having been given to. Their gifts were offered, not out of penance, but out of gratitude for all that they had received from God. Above all the Harvest Festival celebrated that they had not been left alone by God and that the end of the story was home, fruitfulness and life as the people of God.

For us the Creeds, and especially the Eucharistic prayers, function in the same way as the Harvest confession. Each Sunday Exodus and Easter themes resound, and our holy day becomes a time when we re-enter the narrative which points us once more to the source of our life.

On the First Sunday of Lent we are here to say that there is bounty at the end the journey with Jesus. It may cost us something to get there, because what he gives does not come cheaply, even if it is free. One of the best things about Lent is that it is a season of remembrance. It tells of one of us who was tempted as we are, but remained true to his calling as a son of God. His victory of self-giving, symbolised in the Cross, stands as a sign of hope, vision and strength. Whereas Adam was the first of a new humanity that went astray from its purpose. Thanks to Jesus, who was tempted and crucified, there begins another race, one that is not trapped in the mistakes of the past. He is the first fruits of a harvest that has been gifted to us. Thanks to him there begins a new humanity that has a renewed possibility of faithfulness before it. During this 40 period of Lent, we travel with his sign of the Cross before us. It appears as a sign of death, but actually it is a sign of life, and in this strength we may safely live. Thanks be to God.