

## Sermon: The Temptations in the Wilderness

Lent I

All the sermons in Lent will be on the Gospel for the Day, so that we may follow Our Lord's journey from the wilderness to the Cross. Taken together, this series of sermons will provide what I think modern authorities call a *Lent Course*. After Easter, the series will be published, free of charge, as a booklet by St Michael's Foundation.

So, to begin: *Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil*. We must first understand who this figure, the devil, is. The devil is not a power equal but opposite to God. We are not Zoroastrian dualists with their worship of the god of light, Ahura Mazda – does anyone remember *Mazda* light-bulbs? – versus the god of darkness, Angra Mainyu. I think the new low-energy bulbs were created by the god of darkness. The Bible teaches that there is only one absolute power, one Creator, and that is God. So where did the devil come from? The Fourth Lateran Council of the church tells us plainly: *The devil was created by God good, but by himself he has made himself evil*.

Of course, the devil, before his disobedience, was the sublime angel named in the Bible as Lucifer – bringer of light. And, as an angel, he was of higher intelligence than mere mortals. So he would understand only too well the Ontological Argument of St Anselm – that there is only one God and nothing as great as God can exist. So the devil knew he could never equal God. So he strove to be the ape of God, to try to establish a rule of his own which would at least be a parody of God's kingdom. The ape of God with his monkey tricks. Or as Milton said, he thought it *better to rule in hell than serve in heaven*.

So the devil, or Satan, was created good by God but fell by his own ambition. Isaiah the prophet says, *How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How art thou brought down to the ground...Thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit*. And Jesus himself told his disciples, *I beheld Satan, as lightning fall from heaven*.

*Satan or the devil* is derived from διαβαλλειν or κατηγορος – the Slanderer or the Accuser. And, to begin with, God puts Satan to good use. For instance, there is that delightful, enchanting story at the start of *The Book of Job*:

*Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also among them*.

Satan was thus one of the sons of God. And you remember how God gives Satan leave to test the righteous man, Job. You might say that God uses Satan as a sort of Counsel for the Prosecution. God not only gave Satan leave to tempt Job, but today's Gospel tells us he was free to tempt Christ also.

Now the next problem is about the reality of these temptations. If Christ was perfect, then it was impossible for him to fall to temptation. But, if it was impossible for him to fall, then the temptations were a sham. How is this resolved? By understanding that Christ was fully God and fully man. And his perfection as a man was only because he was obedient to God. He was, as St Paul tells us, the Second

Adam: but obedient where the first Adam disobeyed. Of his own will Christ chose obedience to his Father.

The first temptation, *If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread*. There Jesus was in the Wilderness of Judea: dry, white, cracked rock. Fainting with hunger, Jesus would have perceived this landscape as a delirious jigsaw. And there were little stones there – called in the Greek λιθοι. They looked very much like little loaves – called in the Greek, αρτοι. And so you have a pun, a confusion of both sight and sense: *Command that these λιθοι be made αρτοι*. The devil was preying upon the fact that Jesus was exhausted. A hungry, exhausted man could wish the stones were loaves: they look so alike them.

And Jesus' reply: *Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God*.

Here the humility of Christ is profound. In the Old Testament, God miraculously fed man with bread in the wilderness. Here again in the wilderness God refuses to provide bread for himself. And here are depths. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. *Bethlehem* means *house of bread*. This is one of the first intimations in the Gospels of the Sacrament of the Bread which is his Body. The exhausted Jesus gives the devil a lesson in theology: *live by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God*. And, of course, Jesus *is* the Word of God made flesh. We are to live by him then.

The devil *setteth him upon a pillar of the temple and saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down, for it is written he shall give his angels charge of thee lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone*.

Here we enter deeply into the tormented mind of the tempted Christ. He knew what his vocation demanded: that his life would end on the Cross. Was this then a temptation to suicide – an understandable longing to avoid his destiny? But this was not a mere challenge to perform a conjuring trick: *Chuck yourself down – you're the Son of God – you'll be all right*. It is another theological lesson handed out by Christ to Satan. He says, *Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God*. So we see how Jesus answered the first temptation by saying *MAN does not live by bread alone*. He answers the second temptation with the words, *Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy GOD*. So, right at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus has announced himself as both Man and God.

As for throwing himself off the top of the Temple. Well the temple was the holy place. Christ, at his Incarnation, has already come down from the holy place, from heaven where he was at the Father's side, to condescend to be a man and to dwell among us. Yet another theological lesson for the devil – and for us.

The third temptation: *He sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them and saith, All these things will I give thee if thou wilt fall down and worship me*. It is a wonderful piece of irony. Jesus is the Word *by whom all things were made, and without him was not anything made that was made*. And here comes smarty-pants Satan presuming to offer Christ what he already has by virtue of the fact that he made them. In truth, the devil can offer nothing. All reality is of God. The only things that Satan can

offer are perversions of reality. And a perversion of reality is called in ordinary English, *a lie*. One of the ancient titles for the devil is *Father of Lies*. Besides, the devil is a rapist and an exploiter. What he cannot bear is to know that Christ did not come to exploit the world, but to save it.

Satan has nothing of himself. All he has is from God. But he chooses to reject God. In a brilliant commentary on this, C.S. Lewis says:

*Satan's monomaniac concern with himself and his supposed rights is a necessity of the satanic predicament...He has wished to be himself, and to be in himself and for himself...To admire Satan then is to give one's vote not only for a world of misery, but also for a world of lies and propaganda, of wishful thinking...Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven...This fails to be a roaring farce only because it spells agony. Satan actually WANTS to go on being Satan. As Shakespeare defined the nihilistic loneliness of hell: Richard loves Richard: that is, I am I.*

Satan wants only to go on being *nothing*. The ape of God and the Father of Lies There is a horrifying, dismal contemporary echo of this appalling sentiment right at the end of Samuel Beckett's novel *The Unnameable*: *I must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on.*

*This fails to be a roaring farce only because it spells agony.* The agony it spells is of course the agony of Christ: *in the garden secretly and on the Cross on high.*

His agony was for you and for your salvation. If you will come and listen to these Lent gospels, you will know the whole story once again.