



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, February 21, 2010
The First Sunday in Lent

Litany & Choral Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Saint Luke 4:1-13

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TRIED AND TESTED

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Did you hear what Saint Luke said about Christ's temptation in the wilderness by Satan? He said, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit [after his Baptism], returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil." The entire experience was the project of God!

This is the same Holy Spirit who overshadowed the Blessed Virgin Mary at Christ's conception; the same Holy Spirit who, at Christ's Baptism in the River Jordan, descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove as the voice came from heaven, "Thou art my Son, my Beloved; with thee I am well pleased."¹ God the Holy Spirit also led Jesus for forty days to be tempted of Satan.

Each temptation, though coming at Jesus from a different angle, aims at the same thing: the subversion of his beloved Sonship in God. The first uses physical hunger, as the devil suggests he use his power to turn stones to bread. The second employs a worldly conception of power, as the devil suggests a deal with Christ, worship in exchange for control. The third uses the supernatural, as the devil suggests a foolhardy escapade to test God's will and power. Each time the devil quotes Scripture to back up his suggestion. Each time Jesus rebukes the suggestion with a Scriptural text. But Jesus never moves from his moment-by-moment, step-by-step trust and obedience: He submits to God's providence for daily food, for the coming of God's kingdom, and for protection. Jesus never "outruns providence." And so the devil leaves Jesus for the time being.

Temptation is a constant fact of life. Temptation is part and parcel of free will, and the exercise of free will is the heart of what it means to be a man, woman or child, a human being made in the image of God. Love is not possible without freedom; it is not automatic and cannot be coerced. The angels, who are free spirits of a different order from mortals like us, must choose for all eternity whether to love and serve their maker. Thus the devil

¹ Luke 1:35; 3:22

himself and his legions are but fallen angels, creatures, who have chosen darkness rather than light. We, who are free also but made of the earth, must work out our choices over time, a lifetime, and then God will show us what we have chosen.

We know our choices are very much a mixed bag. Even the greatest saints are most especially aware (more keenly than those of us whose sensitivities are not so well tuned), aware that they are soiled by sin and marred by faultiness. Thank God our eternal destiny is not merely the result of a judgment on our merits. Our eternal destiny is a judgment on the merits of Christ and our willingness to receive those merits. God has always known the risks and the costs of his creation of free creatures. God has taken those risks because God is Love. The Gospel of Christ is the Good News that God has paid the cost of his love himself. He has saved the great mixed bag of his creatures in his Beloved Son. Jesus, the Victor in the wilderness, has won the day for us.

Jesus experienced temptation as no other human being has or can, and as a result he is infinitely qualified as a sympathetic Savior. In the words of a great bishop and scholar, “Sympathy with the sinner in his trial does not depend on the experience of sin, but on the experience of the strength of the temptation to sin – which only the sinless can know in its full intensity. He who falls yields before the last strain.”² In other words, we quit the battle before it is over. But Christ truly can say with all authority, “It is finished!”

Christ’s temptations were designed for the Messiah, and they are all-inclusive. But we sinners have plenty of our own: the trials of life are manifold, and we all have them right to the end. The Lord taught us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” This means, “Save us in the time of trial and deliver us from evil.” The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tested; the devil was ready and willing to tempt. God allows us to be tested; but his will is that we pass through our trials by relying on his sufficient grace in time of need. For the fact is, we cannot be known, we do not know ourselves, if we have not been tried; and our progress can only be measured by means of life’s trials. Obedience is learned by trial.

Furthermore, even (especially) in failure, we come to see the mercy of God’s Beloved Son, in whom we have forgiveness, new beginnings and, through faith in Christ, victory. “O loving wisdom of our God! When all was sin and shame, a second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came.” Lent can teach us many things. We can learn a little discipline, devotion and generosity through fasting, praying and almsgiving. But learning from our failures is perhaps the best of all lessons. We can learn that in Jesus we have a great priest and pastor able to sympathize with us in our humanity, not by his experience of sins but by his thorough knowledge of our temptations right to the end. He has been tempted in every way as we are, yet without sinning. Yet he came to save us by standing in for us. The mystery of the Gospel is this: On the cross he who knew no sin was made sin for us, that in him we might become the righteousness of God. That is why the day Christ died is called Good Friday. The world condemned him; God received him and exalted him on the third day. It is finished! Through the mercy of Jesus Christ his Son, we can draw near to God with confidence, and find the peace which passes all understanding.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

² B.F. Westcott, quoted in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Eerdmans), Luke, Nowal Geldenhuys, p.