

## **FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY - Year B Responsibility: Canon Barlow – 5<sup>th</sup> February 2012**

"And Jesus said to them: Let us go on to the next town that I may preach there also; for that is why I came out." Mark 1:38

Peter and the other disciples were probably a bit disappointed with Jesus because He did not stay long in Capernaum where He was so well having so much apparent success. He had healed Peter's mother-in-law of her fever, and the word had spread that a marvellous man was in town - so much so that Mark records that "the whole city was gathered together about the door."

We read in the Gospels that on more than one occasion Jesus slipped away quietly when people began to make a fuss over Him, and to demand His attention. It does seem a bit tough on the unhealed sufferers left behind, but obviously there was very much more to our Lord's ministry than healing the sick.

We should be grateful for the relatively recent upsurge of recognition of the Church's role in healing the sick, with the laying-on of hands and anointing coming into almost regular practice. Yet it was the Church's concern for the sick which led to the establishment of hospitals and the whole medical and healing profession. In the middle ages, it was only the monasteries which cared for the sick and injured and wounded, and only relatively recently has society as a whole come to see and accept responsibility. In the mission field and in non-Christian countries in this way, in Christ's name is being made known. In our own part of the world, through the Bush Church Aid Society which for many years staffed and maintained hospitals at Cook and Tarcoola, not the Government. It is not our fault that they are now closed!

Unfortunately, as tends to happen with movements separated from the orthodox Church, the healing of the sick in the charismatic movement has tended to become an all-important focus of activity, relying heavily on emotional excitement for effect. The argument runs that mankind was created to be perfect. Illness therefore is against God's will. Jesus healed the sick and promised things like whatever you ask for in faith will be given you. Therefore prayer for the sick will be answered by the return to health of that person. If there is no return to health, then someone has failed in faithful believing. It is a dangerous fallacy. This is an oversimplification for the sake of brevity and would probably earn criticism in charismatic circles.

Jesus saw His healing miracles as a part of His overall ministry, and a subordinate feature of it at that, for He could walk away leaving many still to be healed. Our Lord's primary mission - and so ours also - was to preach the Good News of the Kingdom of God. Yes, we hate the threat of illness; too often we fear that death might be at the end of it. Yet we will all die

sometime, and we must learn to fear separation from God far more than death. Even when a person is completely healed of the illness of the time, that person still has to face death: the leaving of this life has merely been postponed.

We, as Christians, are fortunate in knowing that death is the gateway to eternal life. We have the promise of Jesus who said: "Where I am, you may be also." And: "I go to prepare a place for you." The Book Job wrestles with the problem of suffering, and particularly undeserved suffering. Of course it was written long before Jesus came and taught better, and suffering then was considered to be the result of, and punishment for sin. The idea still lurks with many people today: "I must have done something very naughty to have this happen to me." Do we forget the sufferings of Jesus who was absolutely pure and without taint of sin.

Job, in this story, was a righteous man and maintained his integrity. So why was he so afflicted? The story has no real solution other than "God knows best; God knows what He is doing." "The Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: Gird up your loins like a man; I will question you, and you will declare to me. Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified? Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his?" In the end Job admits: "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know ..... Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 40:6-9 & 42:3,6). It was, in the long unfolding experience of man with God, a stage of recognition that suffering can no longer be thought of as direct punishment for sin. Of course sin can and often does cause pain and suffering - but as a result, not as a punishment.

Jesus came preaching the Kingdom of God. He made it clear that sickness and disease are of the kingdom of evil and are to be destroyed. They are in this world - God's world - because so much of this world is in rebellion against its Maker and Sustainer, and as in any warfare the innocent suffer along with the guilty.

The attitude of Jesus to disease is clearly shown in the way He healed the sick as they were brought to Him or as He came across them. In the perfect Kingdom of God there is no sickness, no sorrow, no death. As the Christian works for the establishment of that Kingdom, he must play his part in the attack against sickness and the fight against disease.

But the proclamation of that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" is of far greater importance, for it transcends the pains and perils of this mortal life and lifts us beyond death to the bliss of heaven. Our prayer for the sick is vitally important, whether it be in our private devotions; in prayer groups; by outward and visible expression through laying-on of hands or Holy Unction. To pray for the sick is not an exclusively Christian activity, of course - it is almost an instinctive human action to be found in all religions

and cultures. However, the Christian has more than a concern - he or she has a responsibility to follow the example of Jesus, and St. Paul, and the other forerunners in the Faith. As we pray for healing for ourselves or for another, we need to remember that the principles common to all intercessory prayer apply - intercessory prayers must be seen as subject to that understanding of God's sovereign will which enables us to say: "Nevertheless, Thy will be done." It sometimes happens that the personal urgency of a situation leads to the presumption and misunderstanding that we can demand healing of God.

It is right for us to ask in faith for what we believe to be according to God's will. In cases of sickness, God's will may be the physical healing of the body; but it also may be that the person bears sickness and pain for a time in faith and hope, or that the person is to face death with confidence and peace. The gift of God's grace to face these latter two possibilities may be as much marks of God's love and answers to prayer as the physical healing that has been sought.

It is good and important to accompany intercession with thanksgiving: 'in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.' So wrote St. Paul to the Philippians. Thanksgiving expresses our confidence in God's care for us. We may rightly give thanks for the assurance that He hears and answers our prayers, and that He always wills what is for our good. It would be presumptuous, of course, to give thanks in such a way as to suggest that we already know before He reveals His will in action, what His particular will is for us in a given circumstance. Jesus' words 'that is why I came out' in the sentence I have used as my text, refer not merely to His getting up early and going out to pray and then to move on, but to His whole mission in the world. He came out from the Father to proclaim the Good News of the coming Kingdom - that was His main purpose.

Let us by all means seek healing and blessing for the sick in mind, body and spirit, remembering also to give thanks continually to God for all His mercies, even when we cannot see His whole purpose. Jesus said, 'In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.' (John 16:33) Amen

## SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY - Year B Responsibility: Canon Barlow 12th February, 2012

[Based on the Gospel Reading for today viz. Mark 1:40-45]

"A man with leprosy came to Jesus and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean.' Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said, "Be clean!" (vv.40 & 41)

Superficially, both the Old Testament Reading and the Gospel appointed for today have a simple story of the healing of two men who had contracted the disease of leprosy. The first is the rather offhand cure by the prophet Elisha, requiring a great deal of faith by General Naaman, and the other a typically straightforward act by Jesus without any fuss. And Jesus conforms to the Law by sending the man to the priests to have his cure verified. No mention by the way, of Naaman being sent to the priests - perhaps because he was not an Israelite.

Leprosy, in Holy Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, was not necessarily what modern medicine classifies as leprosy, though no doubt that is included. The old term included many other skin diseases under that heading. Translations of the Bible reflect scholastic doubt about exactly what the particular skin complaint was. The King James Bible for instance, is uncompromising in calling the disease described in the Book of Leviticus 'Leprosy,' But modern translations use the term 'infectious skin diseases. However in that same version, Naaman's infection is called 'leprosy.' So leprosy it probably was. Not that it matters - the miraculous cure is the important thing. Such diseases, whatever they were, were serious, not merely because of their contagious character, and physically damaging effect, but because they were thought to make the sufferer spiritually unclean, and therefore unfit to participate in the worship and other activities of the community. A person who had any kind of affliction was assumed to have offended God, and was being punished. You remember when the blind young man was taken before Jesus, the question was asked "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind.(John 9:1) Jesus, of course, put the matter to rights. But even today there is still a sneaking suspicion in the minds of some people that when something goes wrong health wise, or a child is born with some deformity, that there involved somewhere along the line. It is always a hurtful thing to imply, and particularly so when the parents are suffering quite enough as it is. The attitude towards lepers in our Lord's Day was similar to the attitude of people today towards someone who is suffering from AIDS or some kind of venereal disease. Fairly or unfairly the assumption is made that the afflicted one has been sinning.

So when the leper had to report to the priest, the priest was not acting as a doctor of medicine, but as a doctor of the Law, and he decided about exclusion from the community,

and later, if and when the disease healed, about re-admission. Obviously, when the patient was healed, God had decided that he had paid for his sin, and so he could return to public worship and activity. When Jesus sent the man to show himself to the priest, he was not merely conforming to the Law as detailed in Leviticus chapter 14, but more importantly, he was assuring the sufferer that he was also healed of his sins.

In passing we might note the therapeutic value of the reaching out to touch, pat, or hold the hand of someone in distress and trouble. It has something to do with the memory of loving, comforting, patting of an infant by its mother. It is a way of expressing loving concern which is too deep for mere words. You might have experienced the effect of simply sitting and holding the hand of someone you love who is sick in hospital, and even unconscious. Why do people line up at funerals to shake hands with those who have been bereaved, or pat them on the shoulder? It is a non-verbal way of reassuring a person when the right words won't come. Imagine the psychological effect -let alone the healing aspect - on the leper, when, after months and probably years of not only being in isolation but of actually being shunned, a person reaches out his hand and touches him! Understandably, the healed leper disobeyed our Lord's instruction to say nothing to anyone. This is an interesting feature in a number of St. Mark's accounts of our Lord's healing miracles: Jesus tells the healed person or those nearby not to speak about it, and most times the command is immediately ignored. As well as this leper, He raised the daughter of Jairus from death and told her parents to say nothing (5:43); He healed a deaf and dumb man, and told the observers to say nothing (7:36); He took a blind man outside the village, restored his sight, and sent him home saying: "Do not even enter the village". (8:26) "But the more He did so, the more they kept talking about it. People were overwhelmed with amazement." (7:37)

It seems that Mark is portraying Jesus as reluctant to become known as a miracle worker, because people might follow Him just for physical relief and healing, or to see miracles being done. It seems that Mark wants to show that while the Messiah-ship of Jesus is a mystery which must not be prematurely exposed, yet because it is the mystery and wonder of God present and at work in Jesus, it cannot really be suppressed and must come out. It seems that Mark is suggesting that premature revelation of the Messiah-ship of Jesus would detract from its significance which can only be properly understood in the light of the Cross.

The fact that leprosy was equated with sin helps us to see this incident as part of the proclamation of the Gospel of the power of Christ to heal and cleanse the effect of sin. But the term "sin" has lost its power, and much of its meaning in our modern vocabulary. So the phrase "the effect of sin" doesn't worry many of us very much. The Seven Deadly Sins of the traditional listing - Pride, Anger, Avarice, Envy, Sloth, Gluttony, Lust - have all been explained away in terms

of psychology. Pride has become Self-fulfilment. Anger is Stress. Avarice is Competitiveness. Envy is Insecurity. Sloth is Inertia. Gluttony is due to defective metabolism. Lust is merely emotional response. And the Church is accused of having encouraged people to be morbidly introspective, with dangerous feelings of guilt about their natural instincts. The uncomfortable truth is this: even if we have abandoned the idea of sin, we have not freed ourselves from the effects of what we no longer call sin. They are still with us. People still suffer from the effects of sin, whatever they call it and however they try to gloss over the ugliness of the word and what it stands for.

A person sins when he or she sees himself or herself as the self-sufficient centre of their universe. All sin springs from this self-centeredness - pride, anger, avarice, envy, sloth, gluttony, lust. The healing begins as we humbly kneel before God saying - and meaning it - "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." We might not always recognise it, but this is what we do Sunday by Sunday at worship and particularly here at the Eucharist. We are also rejoicing as we worship, in the knowledge and certainty that He does make us clean and whole; that we are receiving His grace to enable us to stay clean and whole. And this is true freedom.

- AMEN

**SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY - Year B Responsibility: Canon Barlow 19th February, 2012**

*(see also Transfiguration next)*

[Based on the Gospel for today viz. Mark 2:1-12]

The great frustration of obtaining medical attention at a city public hospital is the long delay before your turn comes up. And we hear of plenty of people who have to endure pain and inconvenience while they are on "hold". And still we read of wards being closed because of lack of funds, despite the great sums being spent on sporting facilities and New Year's Eve fireworks. Nevertheless things were far worse in our Lord's day. There were no hospitals, and very little medical knowledge. And such medical treatment as there was, was not available to the general population, other than from simple home-made medicines which relied as much on superstition as on their curative effectiveness.

So when a known healer such as Jesus came into a village he would be besieged by those seeking to be cured and healed of illness and infirmity. They had to act promptly, because Jesus was moving from town to town, and healing was not His main concern. Invalids and handicapped people could only get to Him when He was in their immediate vicinity, so when the chance came it had to be taken without delay. That was why the blind beggar Bartimaeus shouted so vehemently: "Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me." (Mark 10:47). A blind man could not leave familiar ground, and Jesus might never come back that way.

There are other reasons for determination and urgency to get to Jesus. One is the condition of the patient. You remember the incident when a government official rode to find Him: "He begged Him to come down and heal his son, for he was on the point of death." (John 4:47) And there was Jairus, one of the rulers of the synagogue, who besought Him, saying: "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." (Mark 5:23)

The incident in today's Gospel also has its note of urgency and determination. Jesus was visiting a house in Capernaum, and such a assemblage in the narrow street outside in the hope of seeing Him, that it was quite impossible for the four men carrying their friend on a stretcher to get through the mass of people. Determined not to be beaten, they somehow reached the outside stairway to the flat roof of the little one-storey building, removed some of the roofing, and triumphantly lowered the patient to the very feet of Jesus.

The four friends knew that Jesus is one who can and will heal, and Jesus recognized their faith. There is little danger that these men more than a mere miracle worker - this is obviously

faith based on knowledge, faith that will not be discouraged by obstacles blocking the way, even by crowds of religious people.. This is the faith that will remove a roof if that is the only way to Jesus. This is the faith that Jesus sees and answers:--not blind superstition, but a sober, informed faith.

Instead of simply healing the paralytic, Jesus declared that his sins were forgiven! Jesus saw that this was the man's greatest need. Without that forgiveness, physical healing would have been a mockery, for it is very likely that the man's physical disability was the result of a perhaps subconscious guilty conscience. With forgiveness, healing of the body could go ahead. And so it is today. We are much more aware these days that the state of the mind affects the state of the body, although we are not very likely to see such a dramatic cure as that effected by Jesus. In our Prayer Book, in the section "Ministry to the Sick" and more urgently in the section "Ministry to the Dying", a form of Confession and Absolution is provided for this very reason. Unfortunately, these sections are only printed in the full volume not in the shorter green book. It is a pity that many Anglicans regard private confession with some suspicion, having been brought up with the mistrust caused by misuse of this Sacrament in some parts of the Church in the past. Because of this bigotry and misunderstanding, a priest is often very hesitant to ask a sick person whether he wants to make his confession. Many people would be affronted - their sins are not that bad! - and some would assume that they must only have a short time left to live. Unfortunately these and not in the shorter, regard private Confession. Yet it is well known that anxiety, stress, guilt, and fear cause illness, and hinder recovery. Mind you, a Christian ought not suffer from anxiety, stress, guilt, or fear at all, or at most only briefly, for the time it takes to turn it over to God. And we are usually a bit slow in doing this. If we are faithful: resolutely, determinedly, informedly faithful, we know we can take our sickness to Christ whether it be physical, mental, psychological, or spiritual, and He will lift its burden from us. We might not be immediately healed in physical terms, but certainly the weight of it will be lifted and we will be more able to bear it. Jesus Himself had to bear the physical suffering and the sense of spiritual desolation of His crucifixion.

Even He prayed that it might not have to be: "May this cup be taken from me." (Matt:26:39) But no, He had to go through the whole agony and excruciating experience. Ultimately He emerged from it triumphantly, as we know and rejoice about. An old hymn says it very simply:

"What a friend we have in Jesus All our sins and griefs to bear!

What a privilege to carry Everything to God in prayer!

O what peace we often forfeit; O what needless pain we bear:

All because we do not carry Everything to God in prayer!"

How tragic if the friends of the paralysed man had seen the crowd, given up in despair, and carried him home. Yet that is what many people would have done. That is what we often do ourselves in the face of our own sickness, physical, mental, psychological, or spiritual. In living the Christian life we need the spirit of those four stretcher-bearers of Capernaum, and the same determined, undaunted faith and trust in Christ that they had. AMEN

## THE TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD Alternative 19th February 2012

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

"As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus charged them to tell no one what they had seen until the Son of man should have risen from the dead." Mark 9:9

Again today we are faced with our Lord's preoccupation, it seems, with secrecy. Peter and James and John are explicitly told not to reveal the vision which they had just experienced. It seems so strange. Surely if Jesus wanted to convince His followers of His identity, His divinity, this was an ideal opportunity. Why the silence with regard to the glory of the incarnate Son of God? Surely if Jesus wanted to draw people into the Kingdom of God, the proclamation first of His healing power, His authority over life and death, and now this recognition by Moses and Elijah, would have followers flocking to Him!

But no. As with many of the healing miracles, so now after the Transfiguration : "Tell no man." Some of the answer at least, lies in the record of the temptations faced by Jesus earlier, in the wilderness, before He even began His ministry. "Turn stones into bread." "Cast yourself from the pinnacle of the Temple." Use the wrong means for the right ends. They were all rejected, firmly. Enticement; buying popularity; coercion - are not the ways Jesus wins people to the Kingdom.

If the Transfiguration had been disclosed before the passion, death, and resurrection, it would have led to the wrong kind of understanding of the Christ - the glory would be there, but not the cross, not the expression and exhibition of the absolute forgiving love of God for sinful man, Divine power was certainly manifested in the miracles of Jesus. Divine love and understanding were manifested in His teaching and in His dealing with sinners. But for many of His would-be followers that was not enough. No doubt it would have been very different if Jesus had been transfigured before a large crowd, or if He always waited for the crowd to arrive before performing a healing miracle. Plenty of personal glory - but no cross with all that stands for. The people would have accepted Jesus as Messiah, but it would have been the superficial, popular acclaim of a hero and a wonder-worker. And the temptation to be that sort of Messiah had already been overcome.

The true understanding of the Messiahship of Jesus lies in His own words: "He began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." (Mark 8:31) So the full glory of Christ in healing and in the Transfiguration cannot be disclosed until after the

Resurrection. Otherwise the full glory of the love of God would not be able to be demonstrated in the Cross and Resurrection. The Cross is much more than an historical event which took place about 33 AD. The Cross is certainly not the act of a perfect man giving himself to appease a vengeful, wrathful God who would only accept such payment in lieu of the wholesale damnation of the race of sinful human beings. It is the act in which the Father Almighty gives up the Son for the benefit of repentant sinners. Furthermore it is an act of the Father to which the Son freely assents. Jesus is not merely the personification of God's power on earth - He is the suffering Son of God, who comes to glory only after His passion, crucifixion and death. It was only when the disciples had faced the cross with Jesus that they could proclaim His earthly life as the manifestation of the glory of God to the world. It is only as we come to fully appreciate all that the Cross implies and stands for, that we can recognise that there lies our salvation, and proclaim the glory of God.

Many years earlier Abraham was promised by God that he would be the progenitor of a great nation. He said: "I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you ....., to be God to you and to your descendants after you." (Gen.17:5,7) And now he was called on to offer his son, through whom the promise was to be extended, as a sacrifice to the same God who had offered the covenant. When Abraham had demonstrated his willingness to obey even this distressing requirement of sacrificing his only son, God took the pressure off, and substituted a different sacrificial offering. BUT, as St. Paul wrote: "God did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all". (Romans 8:32) What God would not require of Abraham, He was to do Himself, and Jesus became the Lamb of God.

"So then", Paul goes on, "who is going to condemn us?" Surely not the Christ, Jesus! Jesus, who died, who was raised from the dead; who is at the right hand of God; who intercedes with the Father for us!

The message of the Transfiguration is deeper than simply showing that Jesus really is the Son of God, despite the outward appearance of His humanity, as if His divine Sonship was somehow hidden away beneath His human nature. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all place the account of the Transfiguration immediately after the recognition by the disciples of Jesus as the Messiah, and Jesus' subsequent explanation of His Messiahship in terms of suffering, death, and resurrection. Having announced His own coming suffering, Jesus went on to teach that His disciples must also be ready to take up their cross, and follow Him. The true disciple must be at one with his Master. So the disciple, and the Church, comprised of disciples, must also be transfigured - looking beyond suffering and pain and death - to live the life of the risen Christ here and now. We are called to live a life of selfless love for others, regardless of personal cost.

Only in this way will the disciple and the Church become transfigured, with the glory of the Risen Lord shining through them. The Transfiguration is not just the historical record of an incident observed by Peter and James and John. It is an on-going experience for ourselves and for the Church as we seek to follow in the footsteps of Christ; seeking to be fashioned after the image of Christ.

**Amen**

**FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT - Year B - 26<sup>th</sup> February, 2012 Responsibility: Canon Barlow**

**"He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and He was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him." Mark 1:13**

It is not easy for us who live in this comfortable 21st century, to visualize Jesus deliberately going out into the wilderness to work out His destiny and His ministry. Of course we see enough on television to know something about wildernesses - enough to prevent us from going out to spend nearly six weeks without our accustomed home comforts! The door of the carpenter's shop had been shut, never to be opened by Him again. He had turned away from His mother's wistful expression as He left the comfortable Nazareth home for ever, apart from brief visits. Then there was the crowd by the banks of the River Jordan; the wild-eyed, unkempt Baptist; the plunge under the water, and then the overwhelming consciousness of strength and power, both physical and spiritual, available for His use. And with that awareness, the need to determine the way to conduct His ministry and carry out the Father's will.

Why did He seek that lonely silence? Perhaps he needed it, not only so that no-one could break-in on His meditation, but because in the enduring of loneliness and silence a person is either strengthened or broken. Only a person at home with himself in the silence is sufficiently strong not to be trampled on by the pressures of the crowd. A person who seeks refuge in a crowd is useless to that crowd. If we are to give any attention to our spiritual growth, as we are urged during this Season of Lent, then we ought to try to arrange time to be alone and still, with God.

As Jesus considered His power and His Messianic destiny, He was tempted to prove to His own satisfaction and in private, that He did indeed have miraculous ability, and that He was in fact the incarnate Son of God. After all, He was truly man, and no doubt as afraid of making a fool of Himself in public as the rest of us. Much of the strength of the temptations lies in the words "If you are the Son of God. You think you are - prove it!"

The first temptation was to turn stones into bread. In His mind's eye He could see the hungry of the world: children suffering from malnutrition; empty-eyed women endlessly searching for food that isn't there; men made callous as they desperately fight for morsels of sustenance for their families and themselves. But Jesus decided out there in the silence and hungry Himself, that He would not give people bread: he would only share what was available. He would sit at any man's table and any man could sit at His - but He would not hand out largess. Jesus intended to uplift - free hand-outs tend to degrade, except in cases of dire emergency. So Jesus never gives patronisingly. The greatest way to help a person is to help him help himself. There was to be no patronising in the charity of Jesus.

The second temptation was to throw Himself from the pinnacle of the Temple in the sight of the crowds. People do not live by bread alone; they crave excitement. Consider how many T.V. advertisements draw on this need, to make their appeal. Workers in dull and monotonous jobs require some outlet, something to thrill them, as do people in the same old routine of daily life. And Jesus knew that He could supply excitement! He could throw Himself from the topmost pinnacle of the Temple; He could come down from the Cross. There is life through excitement - but it is not eternal life. The drive for more and more excitement can lead ultimately to degradation - as dabblers in drug usage so often find to their regret. There would not be much excitement in the ministry of Jesus, not too many miracles. Power to feed. Power to excite.

The third temptation was a blatant attempt at bribery with the offer of limitless power. Jesus knew He had power to attract people to Him, to get them to obey His wishes, to rule and govern them. Dictators and despots maintain their rule by removing from their subjects all ability to rebel, and often all freedom to criticize or even comment. But not God. A man can spit in the face of Jesus on the cross and walk away unharmed. God will not send a thunderbolt and blast him for rebellion, or even send a bout of bad luck on him. God lets little people deny His existence rather than force them to believe. Jesus determined, out there in the wilderness, to love us into His Kingdom, not to force or coerce us.

Each of us has some degree of power: of position, at work or at home; of personality, of intellect, of wealth or possessions. But how do we use the power that we have? Do we use it to crush the individuality of the other, or to patronise them? Do we tamper with another person's personality in order gain to some possession of position for ourselves?

Jesus needed and used the silence of the wilderness - and the self-discipline over that period of some six

weeks - to make those decisions regarding the proper use of His power among people. Year by year, the Church calls us to set time aside for self-examination, self-discipline, self-determination. This is the Season of Lent. We are called to re-assess ourselves at this time, and to ensure that our ordinary human appetites are under control. St. Paul saw a person as having two separate aspects each striving for mastery over the personality. The 'flesh' is seen as the seat of the lower emotions of selfishness and egoism. The 'spirit' represents the higher idealistic aspect of our being that which desires to serve both God and humanity. The Lenten discipline is intended to be a reminder of the difference between the two, and to give the spirit ascendancy over the flesh. After all, we cannot expect to achieve self-control in important matters unless we have learnt self-control in minor things.

The Collect for this First Sunday in Lent sets out the reason why we need to bring the flesh under control of the spirit. We pray 'Give us grace to use such abstinence that, our flesh being subdued to the spirit, we may even obey Your godly will in righteousness and true holiness, to

Your honour and glory." Not a counterfeit religiosity whereby we will food good, nor a conformity to some socially acceptable standard of behaviour – but a real active desire and intention to live and act to the glory of God.

The setting of our Lord's temptations is a strange one, in a strange setting. But as we meditate upon them we may see an underlying similarity with our own temptations. We are enabled to face and overcome those temptations with the patience, courage and inner strength of Jesus as we place our trust and faith in Him.

**Amen**