

"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 lie 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 men 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 with patronage. 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. Man does not live by bread alone. He craves 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 a11 ability to rebel from their subjects, 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 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 men 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 with patronage. The greatest way to help a person is to help him help himself. There was to be no patronising in the charity of Jesus.

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**Responsibility: Canon Barlow**

[Based on the first of the alternate Gospel Readings viz. Mark 8:31-38)

"He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the Law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again." (v.31)

Naturally enough, the disciples were appalled by this statement: So shocked, that they missed the bit about rising again. And as we heard, Peter, the spokesman for the rest, took Jesus to task for saying such things, and in turn was severely ticked off himself.

Up until now, being a follower of Jesus was pretty good. Interesting stories about the Kingdom of God and how to get into it; healing miracles; mind-boggling events like Jesus calming a storm, feeding a multitude from a minimum of food; walking on water; and the pleasing part of being at the heart of the excitement and the crowds. Until .....Jesus put the crunch question: "Who are people saying I am, those on the edge of all this? And who do you who have walked with Me, say I am?" In a flash of inspiration Peter says: 'You are the Christ, the Messiah. the Anointed One - who else could you be? And Jesus told them not to tell anyone about Him because that title Peter used implied various ideas, traditional interpretations, and *His* Messiahship would be so different that it could not yet be revealed. It would be grossly misunderstood.

Having elicited that statement of belief, Jesus went on to spell out what that was going to mean for him, and for them, and for future followers, including us.

Jesus seems to have preferred the title "Son of Man" to "Messiah", probably because it carried none of the overtones of force and politics and purely worldly achievement than did the usual implication of the term "Messiah". So he hastened to remove any false impressions by proclaiming unambiguously that his earthly future would be one of ignominy, defeat, and suffering. Having apparently missed the "after three days" bit, the disciples reacted with shocked, horrified, and strongly-felt disapproval. Spokesman Peter rebuked. Jesus for having such a pessimistic and morbid outlook. Other versions of Scripture say "chided", "remonstrated", "took him to task". However you say it, the disciples were not well pleased. Things are going so well! Look at the crowds which follow us about! Consider how many people lives have been changed by the healings and the assurances of sins forgiven! If Jesus really is the Messiah, they imply, any thought of such a dreadful future must be wrong. The blistering severity of Jesus' reply is evidence enough that what is at stake is a matter of absolute importance. In two ways.

In the first place, when Jesus said "must" - "*the Son of Man must suffer many things*", he meant what he said. He knew that certain future events were part of the firmly decreed will of God. So, to persuade Jesus to turn away from those events was to tempt him to disobey the will of God, as Satan had done in the-wilderness at the beginning of his ministry. That is, to try to accomplish the Messiah's work by spectacular means which would involve no suffering.

The second thing is why the disciples were so vehemently opposed to the suggestion that Jesus must suffer. This was much more than a mere matter of intellect, of not wanting harm to befall a friend, and more than a simple failure to understand what Jesus was on about - all that, but also because the disciples felt it to be radically wrong for Jesus to suffer. That was because it cut across the grain to be followers of a failed Messiah, who suffers instead of producing spectacular victories by an effortless exercise of power. It brings no kudos, and offends their pride, and sense of "rightness". Judged by ordinary standards and traditional understanding, there seems no point in the suffering and death of the Messiah. Furthermore, if it is indeed the will of God that the Messiah should suffer, it might well be his will that the Messiah's disciples should suffer likewise! By their reaction to Jesus' prophecy the disciples reveal even more clearly than

before the truth about themselves; how far yet they have to go; that their hearts and minds still react in the manner of this world - unredeemed mankind. So Jesus said: "You do not have in mind the things of God, but of the things of men."

What the disciples had to learn is that God thinks differently; that his standards of judgement and ways of action are generally the reverse of those accepted in the world. Since this is something everyone needs to know, and there is nothing secret about it, the crowd is called in to share the lesson, as indeed are we in our own time. It sounds like a conundrum: "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it." Jesus was saying that the only way to attain life - true life, the life of the world to come - is through trust in God, and obedience to his will. That is by behaving in a way which seems to unredeemed people to be unintelligent and self-defeating, willingly accepting loss and injury in the cause of Christ and his gospel, and refusing to spend all our energies, as others do, in preserving, securing, and enriching our life in this world.

No comment is made in St. Mark's Gospel from where this incident comes, as to why the Messiah and his apostles should suffer. We might wonder ourselves. To the early Christians the situation was clearly a matter of sharp contrast. The Kingdom of Heaven was entirely conformed to the holiness of God; this world was ruled or heavily influenced by the forces of evil, and governed by their corrupt values and designs. One day God would judge this world and bring this age to an end, transforming whatever and whoever in it that could be transformed. But meanwhile, so long as this world lasts, anyone who represented God's realm and values must expect misunderstanding and persecution from the evil powers and human beings affected by them.

It is not difficult for us in this modern age to see evil at work influencing the inherent destructive tendencies of men and women, and attacking even those aspects of our civilization which strive for the spiritual, moral, and physical well-being of the population. And those who stand against such forces often suffer. To put oneself in the front line of such action is to do what Jesus said we must do: Take up our cross, whatever it might be, and follow him. Deliberately. No-one can pretend that this is easy. We are all afraid of pain and suffering, and afraid of embarrassment before our friends. But we Christians must remember what is at stake - only our hope of a place in the Kingdom of Heaven! Our age, by and large, is in conflict with the standards of Almighty God, as set out by his Son, Jesus Christ. If we are ashamed to admit our adherence to Christ and his teaching and standards, and give in to the standards of this world, then we can expect only one verdict: "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

*Remember, O Lord, what you have wrought in us, and not what we deserve, and, as you have called us to your service, make us worthy of our calling; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

**AMEN**

**Responsibility: Canon Barlow**

Today's Gospel passage puts before us St. John's account of the cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem by Jesus. Each of the four Evangelists recorded this event, obviously all considering it highly significant. But John is unique in placing it at the beginning of our Lord's ministry - the other three connect it with the Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem, near the climax to His ministry. To Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the Cleansing is the final, absolute confrontation with the leaders of the Old Covenant Church, who refused to see that the New Covenant was being proclaimed. To those leaders, the actions of Jesus were blasphemous, and the last straw in what they considered a long list of provocations. St. Mark says that from this incident "the chief priests and scribes sought to destroy Him." (11.18)

But John has a different reason for his chronological placing of the event. Of course there might have been two such occasions, but it is much more likely that John deliberately exercised some editorial license to show early in his Gospel that Jesus is indeed the Christ - the others gradually unfold that revelation.

The innermost courts of the Temple were restricted to Jews only. Around them was an outer courtyard to which Gentiles were admitted. The way to the inner courts was barred on pain of death to a Gentile, but open to any Gentile to pass the barrier by becoming a Jew. The message being spelt out by this arrangement was that only through Israel could the Gentiles approach the Holy of Holies - the Presence of God in His appointed holy place, and that God had intended this to be the way to Him.

In order to ensure that only unblemished birds and animals were offered in sacrifice, and to make sure that only the ritually clean Temple coinage was offered in payment of the Temple tax which every Jew had to pay annually, traders' stalls and money exchangers had been permitted in the court of the Gentiles - with considerable profit for the Temple authorities and wide open to the possibility of crooked dealing.

By overturning these stalls in indignation and disgust, Jesus was fulfilling yet another prophecy, this time by the prophet Malachi: "The Lord whom ye seek will suddenly come to His temple .... He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver till they present right offerings to the Lord." (3:1,3)

The Temple was intended to be, as Isaiah said, "a house of prayer for all nations." By permitting and encouraging the exclusion of the Gentiles, the non-Jews, the authorities were literally as well as symbolically preventing the Gentiles from approaching God; by the cheating of the traders and the money-changers they were turning the temple into the den of thieves spoken of by Jeremiah. (7:11)

John has recorded this dramatic and symbolic incident early in his Gospel to show that Jesus by fulfilling so many of the old prophecies was clearly the Messiah. We may also take it that John meant his readers to be aware that the coming of the Messiah meant the end of blood sacrifices, around which the Temple worship revolved, as Jesus drives out not only the traders but the sheep and oxen, and releases the pigeons. Jesus was demanding the change from sacrificial to spiritual worship. And, when the Temple authorities want to know by what right He demands this, He answers: "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." Their involvement with the physical, ecclesiastical building blinded them from recognizing the messianic significance of what Jesus was saying, and John openly identifies for his readers the meaning as a foretelling of the death and resurrection of Jesus: "But He spoke of the temple of His body." (v.21)

The resurrection of Jesus then, was to be the sign that Jesus would offer to His people as His right and authority for the replacement of the old religion, and the throwing-out of all that was superficial and dishonest. For by His death and resurrection the narrow, nationalistic religion of the Jews would be replaced by the universal, inclusive Gospel of Jesus Christ. The repeated blood sacrifices of Judaism would be replaced by the one and once for all offering of Himself, the Son of God. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up ..... He was speaking of the temple of his body."

St. Paul, in writing to the Corinthians takes up this idea of the body being a temple, and says: "Do you not know that you are God's temple, and that God's Spirit dwells in you? God's temple is holy, and that temple you are." (1 Cor.3:16,17) And again: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? So glorify God in your body." (1 Cor.6:19,20)

What a tremendously high value this places on our ordinary, human, frail bodies! Yet when you stop to think about it, it is true. With our bodies we express ourselves for good, or for bad; with our bodies we create - or we may destroy; with our bodies we express our worship of God - or we may use them to exclude Him and even defy Him. If we accept the teaching of St. Paul and see ourselves as temples of the Holy Spirit, how can we ever again abuse them? What does this say about excessive use of alcohol, junk food, nicotine, drugs - anything which makes our bodies which include our brains, less than what they were intended to be? Temples of the Holy Spirit - it's a bit embarrassing!

Our lives should be ordered and arranged by a recurrent recognition and acknowledgement that they are to be appropriate dwelling-places for God. Like the Temple authorities in Jerusalem we may have got our understandings and our priorities wrong. We need to welcome the Saviour into the temples of our lives and ask Him to cast out everything that is not worthy of a dwelling-place for God. In limited human terms of course.

Originally the Ten Commandments set out by Moses, as we heard in today's Old Testament Reading, were a basic set of minimum rules for people to live as temples of the Holy Spirit, although they could not possibly understand that terminology. They formed the basis of the Law, and down through the centuries that Law became more and more complex, until worship and religion became a thing of ritual and ceremonial and duty, bound by all kinds of taboos and prohibitions. And that happened because the main ingredient in the relationship between God and Man was missing from Man's side - love.

All too often the Church is written off by the outside observer as repressive and joyless. It is not easy to speak out and proclaim a certain action or activity as destructive without appearing to be negative. Yet Christianity is a joyful, positive thing - as I hope you have found it to be. So we express it as best we can in our worship, in our service to others, in the treatment of our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit.

Our Lord's action in cleansing the Temple was positive. So is His summary of the old negative Law: "You shall love the Lord your God. You shall love your neighbour. On these two Commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

**AMEN**

"This is the judgement: that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light." (John 3:19)

Rather a sad statement by our Lord, but still very appropriate in our own day and age.

The lead-up to today's Gospel Reading is this: Jesus had been approached by Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews. "Rabbi," Nicodemus said, "we know you are a teacher come from God, for no-one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." We are not told just why Nicodemus had gone to Jesus: he was obviously well placed in society; probably well-off; educated, and successful in life. There must have been some emptiness in Nicodemus' life. Probably he had reached that point in his life when he realised that what he had was superficial in terms of real living. It would be good if all men and women recognised their mid-life crisis as a spiritual problem and sought Jesus! And Jesus confronted Nicodemus with the statement: "Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the Kingdom of God." He went on to say: "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the Kingdom of God." To be born of water certainly refers to Baptism. Baptism means a new beginning, a clean start. It ought to begin with the honest admission that one's life is not what it ought to be, and there is a desire to change it.

The Order of Baptism in the Prayer Book for Australia puts it this way: "Baptism with water signifies the cleansing from sin that Jesus' death makes possible, and the new life that God gives us through the Holy Spirit. In baptism, the promises of God are visibly signed and sealed for us. We are joined to Christ, and made members of his body, the Church universal."

All too often well-intentioned people forget their new start; forget the new start they have undertaken on behalf of their children, in the case of Infant Baptism. It usually comes about because the ways of the world - the pleasures, the self-indulgence, the thoughtlessness, the temptations, lure them from the light of Christ. The light is often too strong, and they cannot cope with the exposure of their weaknesses and their faults and their shortcomings. "The light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light."

Time and time again throughout their history, the Israelites had failed to live up to God's requirements of His people, and they had suffered the consequences: the people of God failing, and turning away from God to false gods, reaping the results, turning back for a new beginning, failing again. Until eventually they came to the Big Test - and the People of God rejected the Son of God, sent to be their Saviour.

The old Covenant or Agreement made by God with the Israelites and renewed over and over again: "I will be your God if you will be my people" - that Old Covenant was replaced by the New Covenant made with a new People of God: all those of whatever race or colour who accepted and accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

Now the People of God are those who make a conscious decision to accept the New Covenant - not those who think they inherit it by belonging to a certain nation or race or Church.

Yet there is still something of that old outlook left, it must be admitted: infants of people who are themselves only nominal Christians are baptized without much commitment being undertaken; young people are presented for Confirmation and some are there only because of parental or peer-group influence. The clergyman who endeavours to prepare them hopes and prays each time that the seeds planted come to full fruition some time, some how. They dare not refuse to give the opportunity.

Ultimately though, our membership of the New Chosen People of God depends upon our own positive acceptance of Christ as Lord. We might not often think of our religious activity in this way. Our churchgoing might be simply an

occasional thing which makes us feel good after going along and paying our respects to God. Our praying might be irregular and spasmodic - when we are in strife, or worrying, or glad about something that has come right for us. That is not enough. God must be central in our lives. His standards must be our standards. We must be seeking to do His will rather than our own.

And the great thing is that we do not have to do it under our own steam! We know that Jesus our Saviour has been there, done that, and had it and worse done to Him. Even better, the power of the Holy Spirit is available to help, to support, and to guide us in our following and service, and in our times of weakness and temptation and doubt.

Jesus used as a parable of His coming crucifixion an old story about an incident during the wanderings of the Israelites after their escape from Egypt. The people had been attacked by venomous and aggressive snakes. Moses made a replica of a snake in bronze, and hoisted it up for those who had been bitten to look at, and they were somehow healed. The poison of the snake was neutralized by something that had a snake's appearance but not its deadly venom.

Jesus was saying that God sent His Son in the form of a sinful man, but without man's sin, to destroy the power of sin for ever. The cure has been accomplished through the believer looking up in faith to the uplifted Saviour. "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." (3:14)

The term "lifted up" refers not only to Jesus lifted up on the Cross, but also to His being lifted up in resurrection and ascension. This lifting up, which is the brutality of crucifixion, and the glory of resurrection, and the wonder of ascension into the heavenly realms, shows the love of God for His people in a way which mere words cannot describe. "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."

Christ has come into our world to illuminate, to bring light into the mind of mankind, in order to reveal the true purpose of life. Belief in Christ brings eternal life - not death; favourable judgement - not condemnation. Living a life in truth and faith brings a person into the light and out of the darkness.

The offer to us all is life in Christ. Rejection of that offer brings about a condemnation which is self-inflicted. "God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him." (3:17) God grant that we may ever be children of the light.

**AMEN**

### **MOTHERING SUNDAY, LENT IV**

#### **BLESSING OF SIMNEL CAKE**

O Lord Jesus Christ, who fed and refreshed those who sought you in your days upon earth, we pray that you will spiritually feed and refresh us who receive this Simnel Cake, and seek you in our own day. We pray in the faith of Jesus Christ that this may be for us a reminder of our need for spiritual food: in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **AMEN**

#### **BLESSING OF POSIES**

O Lord Jesus Christ, who so highly loved and honoured your mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary: grant that those who give these posies, and those who receive them may always love and honour each other in the same way. May these posies be blessed in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **AMEN**