

**Chapel of St Peter and St Paul, ORNC**

**I am Choral Eucharist**

**First Sunday of Lent [26 February 2023]**

readings: Genesis 2. 5-17, 3. 1-7; Romans 5. 12-19; Matthew 4. 1-11 [RSV]

I've always found something consoling about the story we've just heard about Christ's temptation in the desert. It seems to confirm the received wisdom that one should never judge a man till having walked a mile in his shoes. And in this case, of course, that man is all of us – humanity – whose struggles and temptations God himself has chosen to embrace through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. By this reckoning, God has sent his only-begotten Son to become one of us, so that through the Incarnation, he may know fully what it is to be, and by extension, to suffer as a human being. And there is, of course, something deeply attractive about this: it suggests that God's love, however pure and transcendent it must surely be, nonetheless manages to remain immediate and personal to each and every one of us. In other words, because of Jesus, God really does know what I am going through as a person. Because Jesus has faced the very same world that I face each and every day, with all its hassle and its heartbreak, with all its uncertainties and its fleeting joys, God's saving power has a name and a face, things I can relate to and which serve to assure me that God in turn wants to relate to me.

Now, all of this is good, indeed very good, as far as it goes. But the truth is, such an understanding is really just only part of the Gospel. Because the Incarnation of Jesus is not merely an exercise by God in human solidarity; it's not just some kind of fact-finding mission to help God decide whether or not he should bother redeeming creation. In our gratitude to God for the gift of Jesus, then, we shouldn't make the mistake of thinking God has any kind of need for our human knowledge or our human experience. God's compassion for us is no way whatever dependent upon his capacity to know how we feel about things. Rather – and by definition – God already knows all of that anyway. The danger, then, of focusing too much upon one's personal relationship with Jesus is that it doesn't actually account for full dimensions of what God has done for creation. Jesus did not just come to save me, or you or you or you; he came to save us; and by us we mean the whole world.

If all this is the case, then, what are we to make of the temptation of Christ in the desert? If God has it all figured out anyway and knows exactly what it is to be a human being, why does Jesus need to go through all these trials and these tribulations? Why can't he just go ahead and get started with his ministry right away, rather than hanging about in the wilderness for forty days? In seeking to answer this question, we need to take some account of what we just heard from St Paul's Letter to the Romans. Because in it, Paul introduces the idea of a parallel – a correspondence – between the figure of Adam on the one hand and of Christ on the other. If Adam represents the human fall into sin, and through sin our estrangement from God, then Christ represents God's gift of reconciliation and thereby the restoration of our relationship with God. Or, as Paul himself puts it: just 'as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men' (5.18). The idea that Christ came and dwelt among us not just to save us as individuals but to overcome the entire history of sin and fallenness: this has always been a core part of our Christian belief. So, back in the second-century, the great Church Father Irenaeus spoke of Christ's mission as summing up the entirety of human experience from beginning to end, and in doing so, reclaiming the very soul of creation from death (*Adversus* V.21). In other words, God doesn't just save us from what we have done, but also from what we have been, ever since the first fall of Adam and Eve. When we hear the story of Christ's temptation in the desert, then, we're not, after all, hearing a story about Jesus learning to be human. At stake here is something much, much bigger. And that's because the temptation in the desert is nothing short of a confrontation on the cosmic level. All people and all history and all hope weigh in the balance of this exchange between Jesus on the one hand, and the tempter on the other.

However compelling the temptations that Jesus faces, then, may be from our human perspective, their content is not finally the source of temptation for Jesus himself. The tempter is far more clever and far more sophisticated than that. For he knows that the real test in the case of Jesus lies not so much in what he does as a man, as in who he is as the Saviour of the world. Put another way, the greatest temptation for Jesus is the temptation to try to prove in earthly terms what his heavenly Father has already accomplished. That's why it's so important that each of the offers the tempter makes begins with the phrase, 'If you are the Son of God', then you will do such-and-such. For Satan, victory lies not in Jesus gorging himself upon bread or being borne up by angels, but in Jesus asserting himself as something other than completely obedient to the will of the Father. And this, this is why the temptations that Jesus faces must not finally be confused with the human temptations that the rest of us face all the time. He may indeed be fully human, but that is, of course, by no means all that he is. His mission in the world is to be obedient to his unique status: the unique status of being fully human and fully divine. And this is why Paul reasons in Romans that just 'as by the one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience many will be made righteous' (5.19).

We are saved because Jesus was obedient to his mission: not only to take on our human nature, but then to sanctify it, to divinize it, through his death and resurrection. All that God asks of us in return is that we recognize the gift for what it is, and then offer worship that is commensurate with this transformation. And to do that, we have resist the urge to domesticate Jesus, to overlook or underestimate the fullness of what he has done for us and for all of God's creation. The intimacy of our relationship with God through Jesus must always therefore be matched by a capacity for awe. Christ was obedient to his nature; so let us, with a confidence not of our making, be obedient to our own.