

LENT 4

(J.F.M.H. – 4.2019)

The public life of Christ started with His baptism in the Jordan. There, the Holy Spirit rested upon Jesus not only to bear witness to the Grace within Him, but also to exercise an active influence over Him. And so as soon as Christ had received this consecration, He was 'led by the Spirit' (St. Matthew), 'impelled' (St. Luke), 'driven out' (St. Mark) into the desert, there to be tempted by the devil. Trusting in this Divine compulsion, He went into the wilderness where He fasted for 40 days and 40 nights, after which He was hungry. The Temptations occurred at the end of that time. Traditionally, it is believed that the actual place was a hill to the west of Jericho, whose sides are honeycombed with caves. Nowadays, it is called 'Quarantine' (The Fortieth'), in memory of the 40 days of fasting of Jesus. Long ago, whole communities of hermits settled there, anxious to imitate their Redeemer in the spot where He showed the way of abstinence, self-denial and prayer.

Straight away at the Start of His Public Life, Christ the New Adam went to take up the fight with the devil at the very point where the first Adam had failed, and so to turn defeat into victory. Some rationalists, who wish to strip away all that is marvellous or miraculous from the Gospels, suggest that the temptations were nothing more than an allegory. That like the heroes of fables, Christ was to choose between the path of virtue and vice. However, there is nothing in the Gospel accounts to make us think that this preconceived idea was what occurred. The story of the temptations as recounted by the inspired word of the Gospels, do not suggest that Christ, when He related the events to His disciples, was telling them an allegory, but facts. Facts that were important enough to be included in the Gospels. What is surely astounding is the simple idea of God the Son being tempted. Could the world have anything to seduce a Divine Nature? Where was the merit in such a victory for a soul that could not sin? Even though we know that Christ has a divine and a human nature and a twofold will, it seems that the greatest difficulty to our minds comes from the idea that the temptations of Jesus were quite like ours. It is hard to think of a single appetite for evil in us, which does not find an echo in our sinful past, and welcomed even momentarily, leaves some trace in our souls. However swift the evil thought, the heart seems to wish to delay it. This was not so with Jesus, for He had never taken part in any of the perversions of humanity and no temptation could find a sympathetic echo in His past actions. The other idea that seems extraordinary is the fact that the devil did not seem to realise fully who it was he was trying to tempt. *"Be gone, Satan! For it is written 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve. Then the devil left Him and behold angels came and ministered to Him.'"* (Matt. 3:10,12) However St. Luke adds the comment, *"And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Him until an opportune time."* (Luke 4:13) In this combat as with all encounters with the devil, the New Adam is victorious, yet the devil was still uncertain. It is surely a fixed malice and pride rather than experience or lack of logic that caused the devil to continue with these temptations.

The period in the wilderness, occurring as it did, right at the start of His public life underlined the importance of self-denial at the start of any great spiritual work. In the case of Christ, His work was of the utmost importance to us. He came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. (Jn.10.10) His example of self-denial is followed by the Church and is an essential element in every truly Catholic life. The 40 days of fasting in the desert is mirrored by the Church during the 40 days of lent, as are the twin themes of repentance and baptism. It is during this season that catechumens are led to become members of Christ's mystical body and have a part in resisting the continuing temptations of the Devil. Sacraments of Initiation and, with them, we renew our own baptismal vows. By Baptism, we become members of Christ's Mystical Body and have a part in resisting the continuing temptations of the devil.

There is a common way of thinking that sees no good reason why we should bother to subject ourselves to such a period of self-denial. Other than as a warning of danger, the value of all suffering is questioned and, if possible, avoided altogether. Voluntary suffering is looked at with astonishment. What good does it do? Christ's death on the cross has given us an answer. All our suffering can have a meaning and purpose if it is joined to His. It atones and makes reparation for sin and trains the body to obey the will. By every sin we take some satisfaction to which we have no right. By self-denial, we give up some legitimate satisfaction and so make up for the unlawful pleasure we have taken. Moreover, since we are all one body in Christ (1Cor.10), our self-denial and suffering willingly born is a way in which we follow in the footsteps of Christ and share in His suffering. *"It makes me happy to be suffering for you now, and in my own body to make up all the hardships that still have to be undergone by Christ for the sake of His body, the Church."* (Col.1.24) In this way, Christ is still suffering through His mystical body. Christ is continuing His redeeming sacrifice for sins (reparation, atonement, and expiation) through us, the members of His mystical body. It's here that Eucharistic reparation has its real meaning. Christ Himself takes our sufferings to His Almighty Father. The role of the Church is active in such offering to God. It prays for and gets us to pray for sinners and with its penitential practices and services (e.g. The Mass, Ash Wednesday, Stations of the Cross, etc.) leads us along the path Our Lord chose for us. The vocation of a victim soul of substitution is clearly mirrored within this role and practice of the Church.

The history of Lent is not completely documented. In the 5th Century, some of the Churches' Fathers thought that it was of apostolic origin. St. Leo 1 (The Great) exhorts the faithful; *"Fulfil with your fast the apostolic institution of 40 days."* However, it is almost certain that in the very early Church, a 40-day Lenten period which we have today would not have been recognised. They were concerned to celebrate the Resurrection on Sundays and there was a great controversy in the early Church about the date of Easter, and about its preliminary fast. Customs differed from See to See. In some the fast was only on Good Friday, in others 40 hours before Easter i.e. Friday and Saturday, in others e.g. Milan they had a 5 day fast. Yet others had 8 weeks (5 days per week = 40 days), others 6 weeks i.e. including the Sundays. In 365 (Council of Nicaea), Pope Saint Sylvester 1 through his two legates (The Roman Priests Victor and Vincentius) fixed the date of Easter in the Western Church. From the Middle Ages, the custom of Lent having 40 days plus 6 Sundays was accepted over the whole of the Western Church. At various times since then, the Church has amended the rules on what one should eat and drink, etc. and allowed various dispensations usually on condition of doing some good work or contributing to some good cause. Mindful of God's strictures on the displeasing way the Jews fasted and made sacrifices in Isaiah 58.1-9, one can see the reason for this. Some churches have been partly built on these dispensations, which in Germany were known as *'Butterbrieffe'*. In Rouen (France), one of the steeples is known as the *'Butter Tower'* for the same reason.

The reasons the Church has established this Lenten period include; preparation for baptism and reception into the mystical body of Christ, honouring and imitating the prayers and fasting of Jesus in the desert, leading us to practice the penance required by our sins, and preparing us to celebrate worthily the great feast of Easter. Whatever form Lent has taken, the elements of prayer, fasting and self-denial have remained. Remembering that St. Paul told us that the *"wages of sin is death,"* (Rom.6.21), the importance of preparing for the great feast of Easter when Our Lord rose again and established His victory over death, *"the last enemy to be destroyed"* (1 Cor.15.26) becomes more obvious. The fruits of the victory are that we shall have life, and have it abundantly. We are allowed a share in the sufferings of Christ, so we had better train and prepare well for the fight, praying that when temptation comes we never add to His sufferings, but always find ourselves on the same side as our Redeemer.

