

"JESUS, TEMPTATION AND OURSELVES"

INTRODUCTION We live in a torn and troubled world. News from a variety of fronts greets the concerned citizen daily. The mere mention of key terms reminds us of the many fields of conflict: Apartheid, Bangladeshi, Belfast, Black Power, Drugs, Pollution, Women's Lib, Sinai, Vietnam. We're told that on these fronts is where the action is....this is where it's at!

But there's another front where the battle is apt to be also raging. It's a front that many of us would rather forget; hence, it is one that we tend to neglect. I speak of the human heart and its never-ending struggle with temptation. This front exists not "out-there" but "in-here". And how the battle goes on this front has a lot to say about the shape of history.

DEVELOPMENT Jesus experienced temptation. His public skirmishes against entrenched power are known to us, but his critical and decisive battles were the battles he fought in the solitary place.

I don't think that we should assume on the basis of today's scripture reading that Jesus fought three rounds with the tempter early on in his ministry, established his supremacy and enjoyed smooth sailing the rest of the way. Not at all. Those events recorded in that chapter of Matthew are but samples of what went on over his entire life. They do not exhaust all the overtures to temptation that came into his life.

Nor are we to assume for any reason that his temptations were not real. In the interest of protecting its belief in the divinity of Jesus the Christ, the church has sometimes suggested across the centuries that there was no way in which Jesus could have fallen short and sinned. If we go that road then his temptations were void of real struggle, nothing more than demonstrations of an unswerving capacity for righteousness.

Was Jesus Married? is the title of a book by William Phipps that has caused some stir. I think the evidence presented is inconclusive, but on inferences and questionable deductions, but the mere mention of the title, Was Jesus Married? sets off some strong reactions with some people because we still find it difficult to accept the humanity of Jesus. If he were bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh - why do we find it so hard to believe that he could have had to deal with the feelings and the emotions that go with the marital state. For some, Jesus must not be made that human.

The Scriptures tells us - in fact, they insist that he was "....in all points tempted like as we". If he could not fail; if the outcome were never in doubt; if those reported struggles were nothing more than exhibitions of his immunity to sin, then he is not one with us. This makes him a marionette - not a man. If the Scriptures be true - Jesus was not without struggle - only without sin.

A LOOK AT THE TEMPTATION False assumptions to one side then, let us move on to a closer look at the first recorded temptation of Jesus.

Terse and unadorned and leaving much to the imagination are the accounts of this temptation in Matthew and Luke's gospel. The time of this temptation was immediately after the baptismal experience. From the Jordan River to the barrenness of the desert, from the multitudes to solitude went Jesus - in order that the vision he had received might be substantiated, tested, affirmed.

So often it is apt to be this way with us. After some moment of high inspiration - when we begin to see in a new way how life holds together for us - there is some experience that takes us right down into the valley, to the very basics of life and makes us wonder whether we were not deceived up there on the mountain top. "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" - these were the words associated with the baptism. Now comes the tempter, saying, "If thou art the son....."

C. S. Lewis in The Screwtape Letters that some of you have been enjoying in the adult class at ten on Sunday mornings picks up this very point. You may remember that he speaks from the devil's point of view of one who was coming over slowly to a belief in God. The man had been reading quietly in the museum; the Almighty was beginning to open up his mind again. But the tempter reminded him that it was now time for lunch. Time for food. A subject this important could be better handled after one had eaten.

"Once he was in the street the battle was won. I showed him a newsboy shouting the midday paper, and a No. 73 bus going past, and before he reached the bottom of the steps I got into him an unalterable conviction that, whatever odd ideas might have come into a man's head when he was shut up alone with his books, a heavy dose of 'real life' was enough to show him that all 'that sort of thing' just couldn't be true".

Matthew, Mark and Luke all insist that Jesus went out into the wilderness under the auspices of the spirit - not by the inducement of the devil. There is no need for us to spend time discussing whether Jesus really believed in the devil or was actually accomodating himself to those who did. However, the matter, on the other hand, cannot be treated quite a lightly as the youngster treated it who said to his still believing friend, "There's no devil, silly. It's just like Santa Claus....it's your father."

Whatever our feelings about the authenticity of Satan or the Devil - whether he is for reall or simply an importafrom Persian thought, surely within the Old and New Testament tradition, it is important for us to recognize the seriousness with which evil is regarded. Who is to say that there is no ordered intelligence in the realm of evil? For some, it is easier to believe in a Devil than in God.

But here in the wilderness, Jesus - led by the spirit, takes the initiative and moves out into a confrontation with evil. In the parlance of basketball, Jesus took on the devil "one-to-one" in the wilderness.

"If thou art the Son of God - command that these stones be made bread". He had been in the wilderness forty days - a Hebraism for a short, indefinite time. He fasted in that time - a spontaneous fast - not an ascetic fast....spontaneous in the sense that he was so preoccupied with what was going on within that food was relatively unimportant to him.

"Command these stones be made of bread". It is not wrong or immoral to yearn for bread. But the issue here was more than bread. It was a question of being able to sustain belief. Bread is not enough. It was only a piece of bread, but it had deeply troubling symbolic significance. For had he done what the tempter suggested his relationship to God would have been disrupted and his messianic vocation ruined, spoiled from the very start. He was come as the servant of God, and it belonged to a servant not to command, but to obey. How could he preach to others that God was enough - if God, indeed, were not enough for Him?

Out there in the wilderness, in this "one-to-one" battle with the tempter, he was finding out whether, in truth, there is a food that can raise one's soul above the troubles and the temptations of the flesh. "Man shall not live by bread alone". He proved that he could live within the will of God, as three years later he was to prove that he could die within the will of God. Jesus experienced temptation more than once in his life, and each time he triumphed over it...but it was not without real struggle!

HELPS US WITH OUR BATTLE

Now there is another point I should like to drive home and that is this: Jesus can help us with our experiences of temptation, too. He held himself in obedience to God with that very purpose in mind - our human condition and the battles we fight.

Scripture tells us that he came to be the head of a new humanity. Or, as Tillich put it: that he might be the bearer of a New Being. He came not as the second Adam, but as the last Adam - to give man a final chance to recover what the first Adam lost. Adam was met by temptation in the garden; Jesus was confronted in the wilderness. Adam had been surrounded by all manner of good things to eat: Jesus was out where food could not be found. But the first Adam fell, while the last Adam clung to the word of God and did not fall.

How does all of this help us? Quite obviously, it helps by providing us with a good example. In a time when most of our models are models of failure, it is good to remember that there was one who was altogether like us who did not yield. In other words, it can be done.

Let me say it soberly and slowly. He lived without drugs and without alcohol. He lived without an affection for money. He lived without bondage to comfort. He lived without dependence on personal or social security. He lived without popular support for his convictions. He lived without forfeiting his freedom. He lived without violence. He lived without losing touch with God.

It was this kind of consideration that prompted the late John Bailey in his popular devotional book, A Diary of Private Prayer, to write:

"Forbid it, O Father, that the difficulty of living well should ever tempt me to fall into any kind of heedlessness or despair. May I keep it ever in mind that this human life was once divinely lived and this world once nobly overcome and this body of flesh that now so sorely tries me, once made into thy perfect dwelling place."

MORE THAN AN EXAMPLE

But the Gospel is offering us more than a good example. The Good News is that Jesus communicates empowerment that enables us to become what we were meant to be. He is more than an example back there in history. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews suggested this when he wrote: "In that He himself has suffered - being tempted - He is able to succor them that are tempted". And Irenaeus, one of the early church fathers, put it this way: "Jesus Christ in his infinite love has become what we are - in order that he may make us entirely what he is!"

James Stalker, author of the book, The Life of Christ, once preached a sermon on "Temptation" in which he observed:

"All men are divisible into five groups - like Continental political parties. In the 'center' are the tempted. On

the 'left center' the tempted who have fallen; on the 'far left' the tempted who have fallen and are tempting others. On the 'right center' the tempted who have resisted their temptation; on the 'far right' are the tempted who have resisted their temptation and are helping others to resist their temptation".

Within this configuration, Jesus is uniquely on the far right helping us to overcome our sin, our unbelief, to steady us in those difficult moments when we are being tempted. Where - on this spectrum - do you fit in?

"The Expulsive Power of a New Affection" is the title of a sermon by Thomas Chalmers, one of the giants of Scots Presbyterianism. And this is how God gets evil and unbelief out of us, and how trust and obedience come in - through the expulsive power of a new affection.

I remember reading recently - somewhere - that our chaplains in Vietnam have had or are having more success with drug addicts than other groups. It is a matter of record here in our city, without putting down other approaches, that the most effective approach to drugs is that which is being practiced by members of the Pentecostal Church. These friends are not blind to the psychology involved; they know only too well the environmental and hereditary factors involved - but they nonetheless believe that if one opens his life to the living Christ - he can overcome his addiction. Many members of AA would say the same.

There is a power at work within us which is like unto the power that raised Jesus from the dead. When this power is mediated to a person - one who is being tempted - through one who is in touch with the love of God, new life can happen.

SUMMING IT UP Jesus experienced temptation at many points in his life. He battled, fought, and triumphed. He can help us with our temptations. How goes the battle in your heart? "in-here" - not "out-there"...

To an eager young reformer, Count Tolstoy once said:

"Young man,...you sweat too much blood for the world; sweat some for yourself, first. If you want to make the world better you have to be the best you can. You cannot bring the Kingdom of God into this world until you bring it first into your own heart!"

And it was to this struggle that Browning directed us when he said:

".....when the fight begins with himself,
A man's worth something. God stoops o'er his head,
Satan looks up between his feet - both tug -
He's left, himself, i' the middle; the soul wakes and grows.
Prolong that battle through his life!"

PRAYER Check in us, O God, this tendency to divert attention from our sin by focusing on the sins of others or the injustices of the world at large. Infuse us with such power that our wills may regain their spunk and our heads and hearts their courage, as we wrestled with our weaknesses. Amen