

## "TEMPTED BY THE DEVIL"

TEXT: "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil"

(Matthew 4: 1)

### INTRODUCTION

"Religion", said the philosopher Whitehead, "is what people do with their solitude". I wonder if he didn't have this particular story in mind. It is the Holy Spirit, you remember, that led Jesus into the wilderness to be tested, to find out what was really in the bottom of His heart, knowledge that He could only come by after He had been eyeball to eyeball with the Devil.

In other words, solitude is where you have it out, where you think things through, where you decide the basic issues of your life. What, for example, you are going to do with your loneliness, for everyone of us finally is alone. We are born alone, we die alone, and in between we stumble along in the footsteps of lonely literary prototypes, the likes of Abraham, Ulysses, Faust.

Solitude is also where you decide how you are going to be with other people. Said another philosopher, "Hell is other people". I don't believe it, but he had a point. Solitude is where you decide how much money you don't need, where your instincts for self-preservation go up against your convictions about self-sacrifice. Solitude, in short, is scary; in fact so scary that only infrequently do we stop to pay calls on ourselves, and even then we are lucky to find anyone at home.

### DEVELOPMENT

But going back to the story, "The devil said to Him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.'"

As in a congregation of this size there are always some who don't believe in the devil, before going further I want to describe to them this person I myself know so well. The devil is a person because he/she - if anyone is androgynous it's the devil - the devil is a person because evil is experienced as an intensely personal power. The devil is a person also, not because evil exists outside of us, but because evil is experienced as something within us but greater than us; hence it's separate existence. And the most important thing you can say about the devil is that he/she is a fallen angel.

To me, one of the craziest ideas that people have ever come up with is the notion that evil arises in our so-called "lower" nature. The devil doesn't ask Jesus how He feels about sex, nor does Jesus put that question to anybody else, for both know that evil arises in our "higher" nature, in that which is most god-like in us - our freedom. This is not to say that our higher nature can't use our lower nature for evil purposes, but the source of evil is in our freedom. The devil is always advising us how to use our freedom, and although he's subtle, his advice is always the same. "I'll tell you what to do with your freedom" says the devil, "sell it."

I said the devil was subtle. Notice the way he begins. "If you are the Son of God..." What makes him so devilish is that he attacks where we are most vulnerable - at the point of our identify. He causes us to have an identity crisis. Clarity about who we are is not as innocent as other forms of ignorance. "If you are the Son of God..." "If you are a child of God..." It

confused about "in whose image" we are fashioned...

muddies the waters at their source. If we're confused about "who we are", and "to whom we belong", then we'll be confused about all manner of things further down stream, so confused in fact that the devil himself may successfully tempt us to prove that we are human beings by doing something inhuman. "If you are a human being, get what's yours and forget about everyone else". As if what's yours wasn't already God's, and as if getting it had anything to do with the essential humanity of human beings.

SURE WAY TO LOSE FREEDOM

Fortunately Jesus knows well that to be the Son of God means you don't turn stones into bread. "Man does not live by bread alone". And for us today to make material well-being the end-all of life is the surest way to lose your freedom.

Look at our own beloved land, at the number of citizens losing their freedom of thought and action. Alarmed at the prospects of dwindling economic resources, they are running scared, limiting their liabilities, trying to avoid all risks. Many of our businessmen no longer show the old American entrepreneurial spirit; most of them are mere managers. Labor's even worse, showing precious little interest in organizing the unorganized, the ones who really need organization.

And what about our intellectuals? How many tenured professors say things they would not dare to say had they not been given tenure? There was a time when tenure protected controversial ideas; now it protects jobs.

And how un-American as well as un-Christian is this "insurance mentality" that wants life to be safe, predictable, reliable. Why, to avoid surprises, tourist agencies are now offering pre-packaged vacations which assure you on any given day one museum, one scenic tour, two cocktails with dinner, and after dinner a bus ride through the red-light district. No one, of course, gets off the bus; that would be too risky.

In the churches, too, the devil is successfully persuading people to be Christians in Galilee, but not to set their faces towards Jerusalem. Have you ever noticed how the nails never graze the palms of those busy saving their souls? We're not supposed to worry about saving our souls. We're supposed to transcend ourselves and save the world. Christianity teaches that life is a moral venture symbolized by the cross. The cross is still in our churches, but it is fast disappearing from the lives of our members.

And the sad thing is that this "insurance mentality", this desire of always wanting to play it safe, avoid risks, sacrifice, won't pay off for anybody. Our un-lived lives will poison our existence. We'll end up with more regrets than pleasures. "Man does not live by bread alone" To make material well-being

ANOTHER TEMPTATION

Well, enough of that gloomy temptation. On to the next one which, if not as gloomy, is unfortunately twice as frightening.

"And the devil took him up, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, 'To You I will give all this authority and their glory; for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it shall all be yours.'"

I suppose that is about as clear a statement as you can find in scripture

that imperialism and despotism are the works of the devil. And once again we are talking of loss of freedom. But in this temptation, whose freedom is being threatened - those over whom Jesus would rule, or His own freedom? "And Jesus answered him, 'It is written, you shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve.'"

"Him only shall you serve" whose service is "perfect freedom". By freedom, the Bible doesn't mean merely freedom of choice, which St. Augustine, rather scornfully called the "libertas minor". The big freedom - "libertas maior" - is to be able to follow through on your good choices, that is to fulfill yourself as a loving child of the same kind of God who for that very reason we address as father.

In God's service then, the one thing we cannot give up is love. In the devil's service, the one thing we must have is power. And in the dictatorship the devil was offering Jesus, in any dictatorship for that matter, the ultimate form of power is the power to kill. (Jung)

Love versus power. In the devil's service, the love of power. In God's service, the power of love. The power of love to redeem, the restore, to renew. Where there is love, there is no will to power.

TO GUARD YOU And finally the devil "took him up to Jerusalem and set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here; for it is written "He will give his angels charge of you, to guard You"'. And Jesus answered him, "It is said you shall not tempt the Lord your God."

I suppose this is the kind of temptation that comes to a person who has renounced the struggle for worldly security, the struggle for worldly power. Instead he has committed himself to God, only with the secret expectation that God will now do all the work. So much spiritually is superficiality, pure laziness, reminiscent of the story of the priest who went golfing with the rabbi. Before putting the priest crossed himself. By the ninth hole he was nine strokes ahead. Said the rabbi, "Father, do you suppose it would be all right if before I putted, I, too, sort of crossed myself?" "Would it be all right"

Said the priest, "Of course, rabbi. Go right ahead. But it won't do you any good until you learn how to putt."

There are so many lazy people in the Church, who want to cop out on all the responsibilities that go with freedom, who want selfishly to ask God to take care of them when they are supposed to be out taking care of the world. Call them if you will, baptized pagans. They come to church but they don't leave. They do church work, but not the work of the church.

CLOSING I suppose the one thing the devil learned from his meeting with Jesus in the wilderness was that it is not very smart to engage in direct confrontation. Don't let people get alone with themselves, keep them busy with each other, members of a mass society. For smart man that he is, the devil must have noticed that it is the isolated consciences in history that have best stood for the universal conscience, not the mass mind. Thomas Merton once wrote:

"It is the solitary person who does humankind the inestimable

favor of reminding it of its capacity for maturity, freedom and peace."

And so, dear friends, let us confound the devil by confronting him. Let us not be afraid to go into our own wilderness during Lent - to have it out, eyeball to eyeball with him on all the basic issues of our lives.

Do we really want to sell our freedom for material well-being? Do we as individuals or as a people want to sell our capacity to love for loveless power? Do we really want to ask God to take care of us where we should be caring for others?

In Matthew's account of the story we read,

"Then the Devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him".

I believe there are still angels around ready to do no less for us. Amen/

PRAYER      Guide us, O God, as we try to follow Jesus into the wilderness. Take away all sham and hypocrisy and help us to make this seeming season of Lent a period spiritual growth in our own understanding of ourselves and in our usefulness to others.

Keep us close to Him as we try to follow Him from the wilderness into the woods and out to the hill and finally into the skies. We ask this in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Master. Amen