

"THE WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE"

Part I

INTRODUCTION

There is a church in Sweden where there is not only the traditional crucifix over the altar, but also another one on a pillar opposite the pulpit. They say that this odd arrangement goes back to the year 1716 when Sweden's great warrior-king, Charles XII, unexpectedly was among the worshippers one Sunday morning. The pastor was so overcome by the presence of the royal visitor that he put aside his intended sermon and substituted for it an ardent eulogy of the King and the royal family. A little later the King sent a gift to the pastor; it turned out to be the second crucifix, and with it were these instructions:

crucifix

"This is to hang on the pillar opposite the pulpit so that all who stand there will be reminded of their proper subject"

DEVELOPMENT

Jesus Christ is always the central theme from a Christian pulpit, and Lent is the time when we remind ourselves of some of the important events of his life and ministry in order to learn of Him and to be "put under pressure" by Him. Today and again next Sunday I want to speak to a particular event which preceded his public ministry, and indeed, shaped the course of it. We had read for our scripture the story of Jesus in the wilderness. This is how it came about.

When Jesus was a young man, there arose in Galilee a new prophet, His cousin John. At an early age, John had left his parent's home and became a hermit in the desert. The sun had burned his skin brown. He wrapped a camel skin about him and bound it at the waist with a leather belt. His eyes flashed and he thundered at the people. He was as tough and as sharp as the rocks that lined the gullies from which he had come. His outbursts were likened to the volcanic eruptions that had made the region a wasteland.

John's message grew out of his disgust with the public and the private morality of his time. He saw the world as too evil to continue. God, the righteous judge, could not let this kind of unrighteousness exist. The Kingdom of God was at hand and the people should be ready. God would come to judge the earth and the people in it. John's call to the people was a call to repentance as preparation for the coming judgement. He baptized people in the Jordan River as a sign of their readiness for that judgement.

And down to the riverbank came John's cousin, Jesus. Sensitive and vibrant in nature, he had been troubled by the times just as his cousin had been and He wanted to do something. He came to hear John, and having heard He joined the others who went down into the waters to be baptized. The record seems to suggest that He was baptized not so much out of a sense of his own personal sins as the recognition for Israel's need for repentance, just as on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, every Jew recites a list of sins which all of Israel may have committed during the year, even though he himself may not have been guilty of them.

THE RESULT

The result was a tremendous religious experience which Jesus could only describe in symbols even to His followers in days to come. It was His call to His true vocation, and His response was His commitment of Himself to the will of God.

With the experience still vivid in His mind, Jesus made His way out of the world of men and into the endless rocks and cliffs of the great wilderness which surrounds the Jordan River. It is a blasted land, contorted by volcanic action which caused great thrusts of rock and twistings of charred cinders. Jeremiah, long before Jesus, described it:

"I look over the earth....and lo, all is chaos.
I look up at the heavens....and their light is extinguished.
I look up at the hills....and they are trembling and swooning in the haze.
I look around....and lo, no man can be seen, and the very birds of the heavens have fled.
I look forth....and see nothing, but the wilderness and all the former cities shattered by the rage of the Lord God."

It was into such a place that Jesus went in order to find the meaning of his life. He had to "hammer out" for Himself what this call He had experienced at His baptism meant....what it would mean to be loyal to God, what it would mean in terms of the expectations of people. Is it God's way to raise the people's standard of living, to change stones into bread? Is it God's way to usher in the time of peace and justice by political methods, political power? Force?

What....is....God's way? What....would.....He - Jesus....do?

TEMPTATIONS

It is important to note that in the temptation stories, the temptation is not to do something low, something mean, something dishonest for personal gain. The temptation is to use a questionable method to achieve a good aim.

There are many people today who would be delighted to find someone who could turn stones into bread and feed the hungry and keep the world's food balance in hand. If He had yielded to the temptation to be the political Messiah, there's no doubt that He could have freed the captives and led His people to a new era - been another Moses. If He had used the power to jump safely from the Temple there is no doubt and no question that He could have achieved a large following and He could have taught many things.

A former professor of mine in seminary use to say, "Temple jumping is really all right to attract a crowd - but, what do you do for the second act?"

The temptation in each case was to use unworthy means to achieve His ends. All three temptations were temptations to do something good, but not good enough! For many today the greatest temptation in life is not to do something bad, but to fail to be our best! Think about it.

No matter how hard we try, we cannot begin to imagine the struggles which plagued the soul of Jesus in the wilderness. Our own doubts and inner temptations are only a pale shadow of what He must have faced. There - alone - He shaped the meaning of His ministry. And when He was done, He was not the Messiah which His nation was expecting, but the Messiah whom God had chosen to confront His world. The keynote would not be judgement, but reconciliation. And He would fulfill the mission of which Isaiah had spoken:

"Behold, the Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

Because He had anointed Me to preach good tidings to
the poor, the afflicted,
To bind up the broken hearts, to proclaim liberty to
the captives and the opening of prison to
them that are bound.
To comfort all that mourn.
To give the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness".

This was to be His mission, and He must have been sensitive enough to understand how thoroughly disappointing He would be to His people. Even His cousin, John, would not really understand Him or recognize Him on those terms. He would not come to His people as a political liberator, but as one who would claim a more difficult allegiance - the absolute sovereignty of God in the hearts of people. He knew His mission. He understood what was involved and its cost to Himself in terms of suffering and sacrifice. He knew that having decided, there was no turning back.

And wearily, weeks later Jesus made His way back into the world to begin the next phase of His life. He came out of the wilderness sure only of this: He would rather be right with God and perhaps fail in His mission, than to be wrong with God and succeed.

CONCLUSION Often in our zeal, our admiration and affection for Jesus, we have made Him into such a "super-hero" that it's hard for us to identify with Him. Here in this wilderness experience, He is most vulnerable, most human, most like us....tempted - even as you and I can be tempted. It happened again in Gethsemane's garden, following the Last Supper, once again His soul became a battleground of inner struggle, temptation. As we read His life, His story once again and reflect on its meaning for us, we find ways that it parallels our life situations. And this, this is where we shall pick it up next Sunday with what I would call part two of the wilderness experience. We shall examine it in greater depth in terms of three questions Jesus had to ask himself in the wilderness. Questions we must ask ourselves.

I would close with some sentences from Theodore Parker Ferris's little book, The Story of Jesus, which I commend to you for Lenten reading. I've read it two or three times and I'm going to read it again this Lent. He concludes the chapter on The Temptation with these words:

"But in the case of Jesus, the decisive battle had been fought and won. Jesus came through this valley of decision with three definite conclusions: no tricks, no stunts, no compromises. And once that decision had been made, what a RELIEF there must have been - a relief of which Mark alone of the evangelists gives us any indication, when he writes in one unforgettable sentence - 'And He was with the wild beasts, and angels ministered unto Him!'"

PRAYER Guide us, Lord, as we try to follow Jesus into the wilderness. Take away all sham, all hypocrisy, help us to be honest with ourselves and help us to make this season of Lent a period of growth - growth in understanding of ourselves and in our usefulness to others. As we now prepare to partake of the bread and the wine, we pray that we may be filled with the fullness of His life - may grow into His likeness, and may evermore dwell in Him and His spirit of love in us. Amen