

Lent I 2019 (Year C) LENTEN LIBERATION

Here we are at the start of Lent – a whole season which gives us the opportunity to prepare for the greatest of Christian Festivals – the Pascal Mystery of Easter. Traditionally, since very early times the Church has encouraged various ‘disciplines’ to encourage ‘the keeping of a Holy Lent.’ The Church of England’s Common Worship lists these. Lent is ‘a season where by carefully keeping these days, Christians take to heart the call to repentance and the assurance of forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel, and by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; where by reading and meditating on God’s holy word, so a person may grow in faith and in devotion to our Lord.’

This is all well and good, and as I said, the primary and the ultimate goal of Lent is to enable us to reach Easter with a greater understanding of God’s Love for each of us revealed through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So, I don’t take away from this traditional approach of Lenten discipline, although it can sound quite daunting and even exhausting if taken to extremes. Each goal is laudable. However, I think that in exploring today’s passages of Scripture further we can enrich our understanding of Lent even more.

To me, all three readings have a strong sense of LIBERATION running through them. The Deuteronomy reading is interesting because it talks of offering thanksgiving to God for the future that faces them. The Children of Israel have been led from slavery in Egypt into the wilderness where they experience a forty-year preparation for their entry into the Promised Land. The mysterious and marvelous acts which have led to this point also have a strong resonance within our own Faith. The imagery of Exodus and deliverance through the waters of the Red Sea to freedom are integral to the Easter Liturgy. There is no mistake in this. The freedom the Israelites have achieved through divine providence lead them to a point where they are able to rejoice in the knowledge of God’s abiding presence leading them onwards. The resonances with Christian baptism are clear. In the early Church baptisms were traditionally only carried out at the Easter Vigil, so, at the back of our minds must be this passing through the Red Sea to freedom and the gift of Baptism to each Christian.

Luke’s telling of the Temptations of Christ in the wilderness is similar to Matthew’s and both may be an expansion of Mark’s very brief version. It’s a very rich account, particularly for us on this first Sunday of Lent, because Luke wants us to lead us on a journey of understanding something of the revelation or self-disclosure of Jesus to us, and what life lived **in** him can mean. Jesus is one who is ‘full of the Spirit,’ following his own baptism. You may remember that Luke vividly portrays ‘the Holy Spirit descending upon him in bodily form like a dove’ at his baptism. The Gospel writer wants us to understand that Jesus is so **filled** with the Holy Spirit, that even when tested he remains ‘the Sinless One,’ the one in whose life we ourselves can find the strength and spirit to lead lives of fulfilment. The Holy Spirit draws Jesus to the wilderness to further strengthen him for his ministry, and it is here that we see further self-disclosure and also an identification with the trials which face us within our own lives.

The Gospel accounts personify the devil, something which has caused theologians much angst over the years, even if providing ample opportunities to medieval artists. It seems to me to be more helpful to see this as an inward struggle that Jesus undergoes. If anyone has seen any of the Lord of the Rings films (based on Tolkien's books) you will know that the creature Gollum is portrayed as in constant battle with himself, appearing as both good and evil. Eventually, the evil wins, and he perishes in the fires of Mount Doom seizing the ring at the heart of the story.

The temptations of Christ cover **desire, power and identity**. To each one, we are given powerful quotes which counter them.

Desire: If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread- 'Man does not live by bread alone.' *Deuteronomy 8: 3*

Power: Worship me and control and power over others can be yours- 'Worship the Lord your God and only serve him.' *Deuteronomy 6: 13*

Identity: If you are the Son of God, throw yourself of the pinnacle of the Temple- 'Do not put God to the test.' *Deuteronomy 6: 16*

What may we learn from this as we enter this season of Lent? First, that in Jesus we are to see the perfection of a life of self-giving which, through death and resurrection lead us all to the possibility of richness and meaning for our own lives. Secondly, that Baptismal life is a wonderful gift to us, because it represents a life-long journey towards deepening our knowledge of God's Love for us as we seek to follow Jesus. However, this 'Exodus' through the waters of Baptism to new life relies very much on what we ourselves make of this journey. Finally, Jesus, the One filled with the Holy Spirit, uses that inward dwelling of God to overcome temptation. In following him; in allowing the comfort of the inward working of the Holy Spirit, we have the answer to the way in which we lead our lives. In so doing we are provided with both the direction in which we should travel, and the strength to do so even when we are 'tested' ourselves.

In not living on bread alone, we are called to challenge the materialism of our age; in remembering that with regard to power, we follow the one who was a servant King – meaning that although we may wield power and responsibility ourselves, we are always to use them remembering that we are ultimately called to serve as Jesus served us. Neither are we to test God by turning the Divine One into an idol through our own feeble manipulations. Thus, we come to know Jesus revealed as the one in whom we are able to experience life at the deepest levels of our experience through the inward-working of the Holy Spirit. Through the waters of Baptism, we enter new lives of Resurrection in the Lord - signs to the world of the 'Endless Sabbath of the Lord' - of knowing the deepest joy of journeying towards the heart of God's Love, sustained even in the most difficult moments of our lives. This is a universal message, 'for,' in the words of Paul, 'there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.'



Christ in the wilderness – Edward Knippers (American)

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11

When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, 'Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us.' When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, you shall make this response before the Lord your God: 'A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.' You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.

Romans 10: 8b-13

'The word is near you,

on your lips and in your heart'

(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart

and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, 'No one who believes in him will be put to shame.' For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Luke 4: 1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone."'

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6 And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

"He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you", and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

(Verse 14) Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.