

LENT COURSE OF SERMONS
‘Man does not live by bread alone’
Lent 1
18 February 2018

This, Lent Fr. Nicholas and I are focusing successively on the three temptations that Jesus suffered in his wilderness testing, looking at what giving in to them would have meant for the character of his ministry, and of his Messiahship, how his ministry refuted them, but also how those same temptations are real for us and for our own lives in faith.

Mark gives us very little information about the testing time, but both Matthew and Luke have more details – details that can only have come to the Disciples, and thence to the evangelists, from Jesus. And so in examining them, we are gifted with an insight – rare in the synoptic Gospels – into the inner life of Jesus himself.

A word, to begin with, about the testing time itself. It was appalling. The land east of the Jordan is a blasted wilderness; scorching by day, freezing by night; almost devoid of vegetation, the water available brackish and scarce; the only shelter caves in the rocks. The length of time Jesus suffered there is quoted as ‘40 days’ – the length of time Moses was with God on Sinai; and though ‘40 days’ was a standard measurement of ‘significant time’ for Jesus’ society, that did not make it much if any shorter than that exact amount.

We need therefore to see Jesus’ period in the wilderness as analogous to the testing in the Siberian Wilderness or Greenland ice cap undergone by young people called to become Shamen. The testing is meant to be a near-death – a very near-death - experience, bringing a human being face to face with the most basic, bedrock experience of existence. It is meant to be – and is – a time of stripping away; of terror. There is no reason to believe that Jesus’ experience was any different.

At the end of that period, Matthew and Luke say, Jesus was ‘famished’, and the first temptation assailed him. Matthew writes “And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

However we read ‘the Tempter’ here, whether truly from an external source of evil or from the depths of Jesus’ own humanity - the temptation is significant. Note that there is no doubt in his mind that he could indeed cause those stones to become bread; his stripping-time had revealed the depths of his power to him. But had he done so, two things would have happened. First of all, he would have relied on his own power – not the Father’s gift – to attend to an acute physical need. No reliance on the Father there, then. And secondly, having done so, the temptation to repeat the act to gain a following in a land afflicted by chronic landlessness and poverty would have returned again and again. The whole character of his Messiahship would have changed. He would have become ‘Wonder-worker, bread-provider, rabble-rouser’.

And his response to that temptation is significant. He quotes the passage in Deuteronomy where Moses, in addressing the people following the granting of the Law on Sinai, talks of the trials they had undergone in the wilderness, and their purpose:

“And you shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments, or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; that he

might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD.”

The test of the Manna was this; there was only enough given in the morning of each day for that day itself. No stock piling. No security. The people had to rely on God to feed them, or die. Their prayer to God had to be ‘Give us each day our *daily* bread’; total reliance. And more, that in thinking about their physical needs, in seeking to ‘live’ the people had to understand that they were being called to a totality of existence with their God; that his ‘word’ - his essence, his revelation of himself to them, his revelation of his will for them - was to be their whole life.

Yes, Jesus fed the people; twice, according to Matthew – to 5,000 men and their families once, to 4000 the second time. But this was not a staple of his ministry or of his Messiahship. It was rather a sign that the Father’s banquet had finally been prepared for his people; that they had been forgiven, and healed of their exile; had come home. In the wilderness, that temptation was resisted; the transformation of stones into bread was itself transformed.

The episode has real, and challenging, significance for us as well, in our day to day lives. God calls us, at a fundamental level, to *dependence* on him. And ‘dependence’ in this culture and at this time, has an almost ugly ring to it. The quality we admire, that we aspire to, is its opposite. We are to be ‘ourselves alone’, self-actualising and self-sufficient, planning our lives and the lives of those who depend on us, to maximize those qualities. And there is enough truth, and enough virtue, in that quest, to make us jib at its opposite.

But it is also limiting; and in its outworking, it is risk-averse. It encourages us to believe that we only have access to our own resources, and therefore to at best minimize, at worst ignore, the resources of his Holy Spirit. We are rather meant, as Christians, to be going out on a limb for him, and asking for his strength to do so; going out on a limb to widen our social contacts, widen the claims of others on our emotions and our resources, and relying on his goodness and his spirit for that limb-travelling not to get us into trouble more serious than we - and he - can handle. Give us this day our *daily* bread.

He will.