



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent 2 Corinthians 6:1-10 & St. Matthew 4:1-11 Fr. William Klock

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Where did Lent come from? What's it about? Why do we still observe it? Every once in a while it's good to refresh ourselves about this. Well, we know from the writings of some of the Church Fathers, men like Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Tertullian going back to the Second Century, that Christians pretty much everywhere kept a fast from Good Friday to the Easter Vigil as a way to prepare themselves to celebrate the joy of Jesus' resurrection. There was another tradition that developed in those early centuries as well, one that we know was discussed at the Council of Nicaea in 325. This was the observance of a forty-day period before Easter during which candidates for baptism were taught what it meant to be a Christian and the commitment and sacrifice involved. Gradually, this also became a time when those who had been excommunicated because of sin fasted, prayed, showed themselves penitent, and were restored to the Lord's Table at Easter. As Europe became dominantly Christian and the baptism of adult converts was no longer the norm, the emphasis of this time of preparation came to centre on that of the old three-day fast in preparation for Easter and on the general need for penitence for all God's people, not just those about to be baptised or those seeking restoration to the Church. Our current arrangement, that is, where Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and continues through Maundy Thursday, excluding Sundays was settled about fifteen-hundred years ago. For all the years since, Christians have on this day read the Gospel recounting Jesus' fasting and temptation in the wilderness. In the weeks that follow, we'll walk with Jesus on his way to Jerusalem and recall the sacrifices

that he made for the sake of his people and be reminded that the way to life passes ultimate through death.

As I've said before, this first half of the Church year leads us through the life of Jesus as we make our way from Advent to Pentecost. Today's Gospel now shows us just how Jesus' life and ministry will serve God's purposes, first for Israel and then for the nations. Our Gospel picks up at Matthew 4:1. This follows immediately on the heels of Jesus' baptism by John. Remember John. He called Israel out to the wilderness and was baptising people in the Jordan River. What he was doing was a prophetic re-enactment of Israel's exodus from Egypt. The Lord was about to rescue his people once again and lead them somewhere new. John also called back to the prophets when he told people that the Messiah was coming. John baptised with water, but the coming Messiah would fulfil the Lord's promise through the prophets; he would baptise with the people with the Holy Spirit. God's new age was about to break into the present.

And Jesus came to John and was baptised. He didn't need to repent or to be forgiven, but in his baptism he identified himself with his people, with Israel. As he came out of the water the Spirit descended to anoint him and the Father declared: This is my beloved Son. "God's son". That was Israel's title. And now it's given to Jesus. Where Israel had failed over and over and continued to fail in her faithfulness to the Lord and to the mission he'd given her, Jesus now picks up Israel's role and Israel's mission. He will be faithful to it. He will fulfil it. And in doing that he will reveal the faithfulness of God—to his promises and to his people.

So, if John's baptism in the river was symbolic of Israel's passage through the Red Sea, what's Jesus to do next? The Lord will lead him into the wilderness. And that's just what St. Matthew tells us happened next.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And

the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." (St. Matthew 4:1-3)

The Lord had led Israel into the wilderness, the Spirit now leads Jesus. For forty days Jesus fasted and prayed, preparing himself for the journey ahead. Matthew says that he was hungry. I think that's probably putting it mildly. And it's at the end of this period of preparation that the devil shows up to tempt Jesus. Again, this is how we should expect the story to develop if Jesus is prophetically re-enacting the story of his people. They were tempted in the wilderness and so now is he. And the devil leverages his hunger. "The Lord has declared you to be his Son. If you believe that's who you really are, satisfy yourself and turn these stones into bread." No doubt, Jesus had spent much of those forty days and nights contemplating what it meant to be the Son of God—and probably also pondering why the Spirit wanted the Son of God to be so hungry. But Jesus was obedient. To embody his people and to follow in their footsteps, being faithful at every step where they had failed, that was the Lord's plan for him. That was the means by which he would redeem his people.

The devil's temptation here is subtle. He doesn't tempt Jesus to disobey the Spirit overtly by the leaving the desert. He tempts Jesus to turn the rocks into bread—to remake the wilderness itself. And yet Jesus knew that the Spirit had brought him to the wilderness for a reason and to undermine that, however it was done, was to be unfaithful, to be disobedient. It was to reject his Father's plan. He rebukes the devil with the words of Deuteronomy 8:3.

But he answered, "It is written, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.""

Jesus appeals to the sermon that Moses preached to the Israelites as they were preparing to march into Canaan:

And you shall remember the whole way that 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 man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. (Deuteronomy 8:2-3)

There was a reason why the Lord allowed the Israelites to be hungry: it demonstrated their faith in his provision. Were they willing to trust him even when it meant hardship? The Lord taught them that there's more to life than bread. What good is living today if you miss out on the life of the age to come? The Israelites had failed that test, grumbling against Moses and wanting to go back to the fleshpots of Egypt. Now, where Israel failed, Jesus passes the test. He trusts his Father to provide where he has led and shows that he knows that obedience to God's call is more important than physical comforts and even life itself. If he can't endure fasting, how will he endure the cross? And Brothers and Sisters, if we can't endure fasting, how can we expect to live sacrificially as Jesus calls us to live, giving up everything that is not him in faith as we look forward ourselves to the age to come?

Back to Matthew: The devil tries again, taking a different tack.

Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you," and "On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone."' (Matthew 4:5-6)

Now the devil tempts him to jump from the highest point in Jerusalem, to force God's hand. Angels would deliver him and all of Israel would recognise him as

Messiah. What a temptation this must have been. During those forty days of fasting and prayer, Jesus contemplated that rejection was going to be a significant factor in his ministry. A few would follow, but Jesus would largely be rejected by Israel—and eventually that rejection would culminate in his death. But what if he could prove to all of Israel that he was the Messiah? What if he could side-step the rejection and go straight to the throne? But Jesus knew that this was not his Father's plan. If he became King that way, he'd be no better than David. There would be no means of redemption for his people. There would be no Spirit poured out on them to renew their hearts. He would be King, but the Lord's promises to Abraham, to Moses, to the Prophets would go unfulfilled. The nations would know that Israel had a king who worked miracles, but that was never the means by which the gentiles were to be drawn to Israel's God. They were to be drawn by the display of his faithfulness to his promises.

The devil throws two bits of Psalm 91 at Jesus. It's a psalm about the Lord's protection. It sounds good, but it's not the whole psalm. Other parts of the psalm qualify God's provision for his people. The first two verses read:

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."

The shelter of the Most High is a wonderful place to find oneself, but to live under his protection requires that we first abide in his shadow. He is our "refuge and fortress", but we put ourselves in his care as we trust in him. In verse 14 the Lord says,

Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name.

The devil loves to plucked portions of Scripture out of context in order to twist

their meaning, reminding us of God's promises of blessing and care, while neglecting to remind us of the need for faith, for holiness, and for obedience. God's people show their love for him through obedience. Jesus later said, "If you love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). The same goes for Jesus' relationship with his Father. The Lord's blessings would come only as Jesus walked in faithful obedience.

Jesus rebukes Satan with the words of Deuteronomy 6:16.

Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Where Israel had failed, Jesus is again obedient. Israel had tested Lord. Jesus, instead, expresses his trust in the Lord's plan, knowing that only through his rejection will the Lord's promises be fulfilled.

Now, the devil makes one last attempt at dragging Jesus away from the path to the cross. Look at verses 8 and 9:

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

Israel, too, was tempted to idolatry in the wilderness and failed—and failed and failed and failed throughout her history. Jesus is tempted as his people were. "All kingdoms of the world will be yours," the devil says, "just submit to me." Jesus and the devil both knew that if the Lord's promises through the prophets were true, Jesus' lordship would extend beyond Israel to all of Creation. Gabriel had announced to Mary: "He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:33). When the Father had spoken at Jesus' baptism, he had spoken words from Psalm 2 where we also read of the great King:

Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,

and the ends of the earth your possessions. (Psalm 2:8)

The devil again offers Jesus a shortcut to his throne—a shortcut that would bypass the heart of his messianic ministry. Again, Jesus knew that what would bring the nations to his throne was the redemption of Israel through his death and resurrection and the display of the Spirit's power in the hearts of his people. In these events the nations would see the greatness and the faithfulness of the God of Israel and they would be drawn to give him glory and to submit themselves in faith to the Lord Jesus. That was to be God's means of welcoming the gentiles into his presence and into his kingdom. And yet, if Jesus followed the devil's shortcut, there would be no kingdom—at least not the sort of eternal kingdom in which all was set to rights, in which God himself was king, the sort of kingdom that Israel had always looked forward to as the "age to come".

No, the Lord had charged his people in the wilderness, saying:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.... It is the Lord your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear. You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are around you—for the Lord your God in your midst is a jealous God. (Deuteronomy 4-5, 13-15a)

Israel had failed. Even in the wilderness, while Moses was on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments, Aaron had led the people as they made and worshiped a golden calf. Most of Israel's history was marked by the worship of foreign gods. But Jesus responds to the devil's temptation with the command God had given through Moses:

“Be gone, Satan! For it is written, “You shall worship the Lord your God

and him only shall you serve.” (Matthew 4:10)

Where Israel failed, Jesus is faithful. He chooses the hard path of obedience that will bring not only kingship, but also redemption. Jesus was destined not only to be King of the Jews, but Lord of all Creation and conqueror of sin and death. For that to happen, evil had to be concentrated all in one place, to rise up to its full height, to do its worst to Jesus, the Son of God, the Messiah—so that God could raise him from death, overturn the false verdict the people had announced, and vindicate his Son. Jesus knew that to restore the life of God to his people, the way to inaugurate the age to come in which all would be set to rights, he must first let evil do its worst—he had to walk the path of rejection, suffering, and death. By his faithfulness, Jesus redeemed those in Israel who were faithful to him. By his faithfulness, Jesus created a new people of God in whom God poured out his Spirit. By his faithfulness, Jesus was declared Lord with power and authority. And because of his faithfulness, the nations have seen the faithfulness of Israel's God and now give him glory as they—as we—submit ourselves to him in faith.

And now we, ourselves, walk in faithfulness to the glory of God. As Lent puts before us the suffering of Jesus and reminds us that God's life for us came through his submission to death, it reminds us that we, too, must die to self and embrace the narrow path, the way that leads to suffering and rejection, in order to know the life of God and of the age to come. We take our first steps down that narrow path as we repent and turn aside from everything that is not Jesus, as we open our hands and let go of everything that is not Jesus, and then take hold of him with both hands in faith, trusting in him for the forgiveness of sins, for the life of the Spirit, and for life in God's world set to rights. Lent calls us to set aside our distractions that we might fix our gaze on Jesus, taking up our crosses and following him.

St. Paul warned the Corinthians in our Epistle “not to receive the grace of God in vain”. What a splash of cold water that must have been. They thought they were doing so well, but Paul rebukes them for tolerating sins that horrified even the pagans; for abusing spiritual gifts, using them selfishly rather than to edify the church; for allowing the values of pagan culture to twist their understanding of the gospel; for abusing the Lord's Supper—the list is long and troubling. Brothers and Sisters, fast and pray these next forty days that the gospel might permeate ever deeper into our hearts and minds, submitting them to the renewing and regenerating work of the Spirit. Let us not receive the gospel in vain. Instead, may we each day die to self that we might emerge the other side of death into the life of God and know his glory.

Let's pray: Lord Jesus Christ, for our sake you fasted forty days and forty nights: give us grace so to discipline ourselves that our flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may always obey your will in righteousness and true holiness, to the honour and glory of your name; for you live and reign with the Father and Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*