



Revd Ro's Reflection on The First Sunday of Lent 2022 Year C

Romans 10. 8b-13

Luke 4. 1-13

Ash Wednesday heralds the start of the Lenten season; it is of course preceded by Shrove Tuesday, colloquially known as Pancake Day. The word comes from the verb to shrive, a person would make their confession and receive absolution i.e. be 'shriven' in preparation for Lent. These words are read out by the priest at the beginning of the Ash Wednesday service and of course are very familiar to us.

'Brothers and sisters in Christ, since early days Christians have observed with great devotion our Lord's passion and resurrection and prepared for this by a season of penitence and fasting. By carefully keeping these days, Christians take to heart the call to repentance and the assurance of forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel, and so grow in faith and in devotion to our Lord. I invite you therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy word.'

This Ash Wednesday of course we have been asked to join together in our prayers for Ukraine and the situation there. The Lenten season reflects Jesus' temptation during the forty days in the wilderness. Those forty days are symbolic in themselves. We remember that the Israelites had escaped from captivity in Egypt by God's hand. Moses led them and they crossed through the waters of the Red Sea and spent forty years in the wilderness. Jesus had been through the waters of baptism in the Jordan River. The voice from heaven had affirmed him.

¹⁶ 'And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' (Matthew 3).

This is so similar to the voice on the Mount of the Transfiguration from the reading we looked at last week. Now Jesus, having been baptised, stands at the cusp of his ministry. We are told at the beginning of our gospel reading,

¹ 'Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, '

This is very important; Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit of God, now he is led out into the wilderness. Why is this? Jesus has heard the voice at his baptism, he knows his role, but just what is he to do to achieve his role as Messiah? I think the first thing that this passage does is to make us very aware of Jesus' humanity. What has immediately preceded this reading is Luke's genealogy of Jesus, which traces his ancestry back to Adam.

This is significant in two respects, firstly Jesus' is human and divine; he is fully human, it is vital to understand this. Secondly, Adam gives in to temptation by the devil thus in the account, sin came into the world. It was humanity's first rebellion against God, symbolic of humanity choosing to go their own way and to turn away from God. This rebellious tendency was re-enacted again and again in the wilderness years and it is still being enacted now. Jesus here has to conquer temptation, where Adam failed Jesus must triumph. He needs to prove he can overcome if he is to fulfil his role. The picture and the vocabulary echo the picture of the Eden temptation account.

If you look at the word 'devil' you see it spells evil. Evil is what is opposite to God's way. Jesus is led into the wilderness, Jesus human and alone,

² '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.'

During this time Jesus 'ate nothing.' He must have been at his lowest ebb. Isn't it at times like this that temptation is at its strongest, is most likely to succeed? When I was little I used to imagine a horrid black figure perched on a rock talking to Jesus. It isn't like that, but we know that evil is at large in the world and we only have to read the newspapers or turn on our television sets to see that evil is as strong and prevalent as ever. The voice in Jesus' head is typically human. These are the temptations that humanity faces.

³ 'The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.'

⁴Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone." '

The first attack is at a very fundamental level. Jesus has not eaten; he is famished. What is the first need of humanity, food, so the voice of temptation whispers, 'Command this stone to become bread.' The preface to this temptation is the key 'If'. It is central and contains the challenge 'prove you are the Son of God.' If Jesus is the Messiah he has miraculous powers. Jesus must challenge himself. What sort of Messiah is he to be? The point is here that Jesus is being tempted to use his powers for the wrong reason, to perform miraculous things to satisfy his own desires, to gain what he wants. Is he to choose to be a Messiah who achieves power by impressing people with miraculous acts, by getting people to follow him because they are struck with wonder at miraculous happenings done to order? The answer is an emphatic no. Jesus, notice, does not get into long conversation or listen to arguments that will try to trap and seduce him into capitulation.

"One does not live by bread alone." ' and we remember that in Matthew's gospel the account reads,

“One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” ’

Jesus does not act by his own will. He acts by God’s will, he is on God’s mission. He has been sent by God to save his people and he will walk God’s path. There is no easy way for Jesus. Think of the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus is at his lowest ebb. When he begs that this awful cup be taken away yet ends with the words, ‘Yet not my will but yours be done.’ This will be Jesus’ guide throughout his life and ministry. We must seek to make it ours.

Next we have the desire for power, a powerful tool against humanity. It is the desire for power to control others, to have our own way that is responsible for so much that is wrong in this world at every level. It causes wars; it causes cruelty, manipulation and bullying.

⁵ ‘Then the devil took him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And 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. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’ ⁸Jesus answered him, ‘It is written,

“Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.” ’

To begin with this is a lie, the world is God’s and all that is in it. The devil or evil owns nothing but the hearts of those that turn to it. Jesus as the anointed Messiah will rule Israel and he will rule the world with his Father. The way to his true authority is not by seeking after personal glory or to control others; it is humble service, it is love. Jesus will worship his Father so that, ‘thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’ There is only one worthy of worship and that is God, God the creator of all that is. Jesus is sent by his Father, he is of his Father, God is his guiding light throughout. Seeking after status, power and control is a very human quality but it is not of God. Jesus turns his back on these and turns to his Father.

The final temptation is to put God to the test, to show off, to show that God will protect him from harm. After all, whispers evil, God loves you and wants to protect you so he won’t let anything happen to you. What better way to impress people than by testing God and proving he is looking out for you. The ‘scripture says’ is added as a bit of extra persuasion.

⁹ ‘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, ¹⁰for it is written,

“He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you”,

¹¹and

“On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” ’

How typical to misquote scripture to get your own way. The quotation is from Psalm 91, (the psalm set for today) what is carefully omitted is the phrase, ‘to keep you in all your ways.’ Yes it means to keep you safe wherever you go but also it might mean the way you choose to walk. Now Jesus walks

in the way chosen by God. Not his own way, not man's way, but God's way. Jesus saw through the deceptions and replies,

'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'

There is no way Jesus will abuse his relationship with God by putting him to the test.

Jesus rejects power, status and using miracles as a show, as a way of getting a following. Most importantly he turns his back on the vices that would corrupt and turns his face to God. The first trial is over and evil vanquished for now. The final triumph will be at Calvary and as the stone is rolled away in the garden. For now Jesus 'filled with the Spirit' turns to his mission. It is interesting that the next thing Luke mentions at the beginning of his ministry is Jesus' revelation in the synagogue at Nazareth and the reception there which prefigures the cross.

Our reading from Romans begins with the words,

'The word is near you,
on your lips and in your heart'

That is part b but the verse actually begins, ⁸'But what does it say?' Unless we know the 'it' to which Paul refers, understanding the reading would be difficult. The Old Testament Reading begins, 'When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you...' These last chapters of Deuteronomy consist of Moses preparing the Israelites telling them what is to come. If they keep God's law, love him and follow in his ways they will receive blessings. If they turn their back on him, if they rebel and go their own way the result will be disaster. That culminates in the exile and them being taken into Babylon. Even when Cyrus enabled their return the country was occupied and continued to be by different powers throughout its history. In the time of Jesus and Paul this was of course the Romans.

In Deuteronomy 30 however God makes a promise if the people,

² 'return to the Lord your God, and you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul, just as I am commanding you today, ³then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom the Lord your God has scattered you.'

How this salvation would be achieved was a huge point of debate and study by Jewish thinkers. The point is the people must love God and obey God's law and turn to him with a new heart and mind.

¹¹ 'Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. ¹²It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' ¹³Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?'

¹⁴No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

Paul is referring to the instructions of God in Deuteronomy 30. God is saying, surely it is not too hard for you to obey my commandments and that means the law. That is what is referred to here when the word, 'it' is used.

What comes immediately before our reading is,

⁵ Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that 'the person who does these things will live by them.' ⁶But the righteousness that comes from faith says, 'Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?"' (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷or "Who will descend into the abyss?"' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).'

Look now at how Paul replaces it in the Deuteronomy passage with Christ and that is the whole point. Christ has come to humanity at the incarnation and has been raised from the dead. He is the fulfilment of the law. The new way begins with his advent. He then is the bringer of salvation.

⁸But what does it say?

'The word is near you,
on your lips and in your heart'

(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); ⁹ 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. Jesus is the fulfilment of the law. He is the one in whom all is brought to fruition.'

Paul knows that most of the Jews cannot get beyond the law; they cannot see that Jesus is the Messiah who has fulfilled the law and established God's new order as promised by the prophets. Now as our reading begins and you can see how dependent it is on what has gone before it. All who turn to Jesus, who believe in him and act in his way, will receive the grace of God which is freely given. They will receive the salvation Christ won for all who turn to him, the salvation promised by God. Jesus embodies the new covenant.

⁹'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. ¹⁰For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. ¹¹The scripture says, 'No one who believes in him will be put to shame.'

At our baptism we make promises, or the representatives make them on behalf of the candidate if they are young, specifically. 'I turn to Christ.' At our baptism we receive the badge of Christ, the cross on our foreheads. This is the badge we receive in ash on Ash Wednesday. It is the badge we carry on our hearts throughout life. So this is a perfect reading for Lent when we repent of our sins and turn to Jesus anew. So many of the Jews did not acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah, the chosen one, the one promised of old and Paul, though this is his greatest wish, has become the Apostle to the Gentiles. The Jews must understand the truth that this wonderful gift of grace in Jesus is for all who follow his way.

¹² '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. ¹³For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Jesus came into the world to save all who turn to him. In God's sight we are all equal. This is one of the wonderful truths of Christianity. Jesus chooses the way of humility, love and obedience, not status and power seeking as is seen in the gospel reading. Jesus is obedient to God, so says Paul, must we be. Paul says, 'the same Lord is Lord of all.' In those days only Caesar was called Lord. If you said 'Jesus is Lord' then it meant Caesar wasn't. But Jesus is the only Lord, the one who they must follow and worship. Lord is the name used in the Old Testament for God. So then by calling Jesus

Lord, it is not simply a mark of respect it is to acknowledge Jesus' divinity and that of course is the central point.

'Jesus is Lord, praise him with alleluias for Jesus is Lord.' David J Mansell

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