

"If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead. Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."
(Office Reading Wednesday of Lent I)

A funny thing happened to me at the end of mass on Ash Wednesday. I was standing at the door saying goodbye to those members of the congregation who weren't staying for lunch, when the Undertaker from a funeral the previous week came into the Lodge. "Oh," he said, indicating the smudged ash cross on my forehead. "Have you just had your Ash Wednesday Service?" Then he looked around and whispered - "I hate the Ash Wednesday mass - it's the service I like least in the year." "Really?" "Oh absolutely - its so miserable - I can't stand being confronted with death."... "Right...(?!)...but don't you...Aren't you in your line of work..." "Oh that's completely different," he said evidently understanding my confusion straightaway. "On Ash Wednesday I'm confronted with my death."

Now you can take all manner of things from his perhaps unintentionally profound observations, but the thing that struck me most was what it revealed about something fundamental in us - something the 'Gesimas' have been warning us about, something that gets to the point not just of the Ash Wednesday Mass, but of Lent as a whole, and of the mass in general. The fact that the heart, as Jeremiah will remind us next week, is deceitful above all things. The serpent is more subtil then any of the beasts of the field. The soil matters as much as the seed. The fact that we can all easily be "those who looking never see, or hearing never understand". The fact that we are constantly capable of staring something in the face, of looking at it repeatedly, of living with it daily, and not seeing for what it is - let alone allowing its reality to actually shape ours.

A lot of people will say - what is the point of going to mass every day, of repeating the same words over and over, or saying all those psalms day in and day out, or reading the same passages of scripture year in and year out, or turning back through lent and advent time and again?

Well, the point is I'm an idiot. And with the greatest respect in the world, I suspect you are too. The point is I have not yet understood the good news of God's grace or the depth of my need of it, I have not yet understood the fullness of God's self revelation in Jesus, or the fracture of His image in me. The point is for all my looking, I have not yet fully seen the once-for-all sacrifice of the Cross, let alone allowed its reality to comprehensively shape mine. *It is finished.* But it has not finished with *me*. And with the greatest respect in the world, I suspect it has not finished with you either.

Now of course there are plenty of other people - not you or I - but *other* people - the woman you put here with me, for example, or our brother with the speck in his eye - plenty who will be tempted to say, "Well - I *do* go to mass every day, I do say all those psalms day in and day out, or I do read the same passages of scripture year in and year out, and turn back through Lent and Advent time and again? I have kept all the commandments since I was a child. Surely not me Lord. Surely I am not one of those who looking does not see? Surely I am not vulnerable to the serpent's seducing half truths? After all I never go anywhere but the Garden of God Himself. Surely I don't need to be on my guard against temptation - I am the sinless Morning Star..."

"Ah," says Lent.

"I'm afraid there's something you should know."

The truth is we need a continually deepening appreciation of God's goodness and the assurance He 'hates nothing He has made'. We need ever surer faith and hope in God's property always to have mercy that makes us trust in God and not in Man, that makes us turn to God with questions - 'Is it really true we wouldn't die?' - or intentions - 'I'm seriously thinking about eating that fruit it looks so *nice*' - instead of cutting God out of the equation, because we know him to be hard master reaping where he does not sow. We need to be rooted and established in the bold belief in grace abounding, that causes us to turn to God with our sin, and not hide from him in our shame; which compels us to press in for a blessing, even when it seems he would shrug us off; that nurtures in us the humble perseverance which asks and seeks and knocks and looks, even if necessary for just the crumbs under the table... We need to feed and exercise the trust in the Lord our Provider which allows us to offer our few loaves when five thousand mouths are gaping, or give up our promise to the knife of the One who granted it...

We need the confidence of God's grace and covenant love. And Lent wants to remind us of it. Wants to establish us in it, to feed it, to fertilise it, to water us by its stream, to root us in it's good soil.

But for the very same reason it is no *less* determined, to ensure we do not forget that grace can be received in vain, that the word of God can become fruitless in us, that even great prophets like Elijah can lose hope and turn tail, that even hearts led through the waters can be hardened in the day of temptation in the wilderness, that we are required to labour to enter into God's rest...

That all of us need turning, and turning again, back to the narrow path, all of us need teaching and teaching again even those things we think we know - of the truth about who we are, and the truth about how we come to be what God meant us to be, when He said "let us make man in our image". All of us need to avail ourselves of every means at our disposal, to bring us back to the truth of the Incarnation, back to the sacrifice that is our anchor within the veil, back to Jesus the Author and Perfecter of our faith.

So Lent wants to teach us two things. It wants us to understand temptation. And it wants us to understand what it means to go up to Jerusalem - to truly see through our looking, the passion and death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord - to duly receive the benefit of his sacrifice for sin, and daily follow his "ensample of Godly living".

In our Lenten lectionary, the *second* of these things happens above all through the sustained focus on the book of Hebrews, and our return in its light to Passiontide and to the Pasch. The *first* - the unveiling of temptation - is here today - in the Gospel and in the Garden of Eden - but also in the weeks ahead: in the texts that are counterpoints to this first temptation, and to these temptations of the LAST Adam; and finally in the garden of Gethsemane.

Easter shows us what humanity *can* be, and who God *is*. Temptation, as Thomas a Kempis claimed, shows us who we are *now*. It is not the pattern of our unperturbed life that reveals us to ourselves, but the eye-opening glimpses of what spills out of us when we stumble.

But *relying* on temptation to show us our shortcomings, and lead us to an ever deeper dependence on our only Advocate with the Father, is a dangerous game. As any professional player of games will tell you - it's true that there is no substitute for the revealing experience of real life challenges, but it's a particular kind of madness not to prepare or train ourselves when the heat is off, not to practice future meetings with those *necessary* challenges, by setting ourselves gratuitous ones - by inviting God to try us and see if there be any wicked way in us, and lead us in the way everlasting...

So, in Lent we ask for the grace to take on *voluntary* disciplines, to face temptations that *are real* - because it is a snare to dedicate something rashly to God, and only later consider our vow; because God values faithfulness above all things; because "Blessed is the one who swears to his own hurt, and does not renege" - *real* temptations, yes, but nonetheless of a different *order* to those which are provoked by our day to day lives: the temptation to act out of anger when we are furious, to speak out of judgement when we are outraged, to reduce people to objects of our lust or ambition when we are lonely or needy of affirmation. Succumbing to *these* temptations, rather than to those generated by our fasts and seasonal resolutions, is the equivalent of crashing a people carrier on the motorway, rather than a practice car on the race track.

So consider it pure joy when you face trials of any kind, but, Lent says, if you haven't already resolved to do so - use this 'acceptable time' to provide trial trials of the freely chosen kind, and practice disciplines that will form you for the year-round struggle with sin, and for the moment the cup is held out to you, and every instinct screams "let it pass from me"...

We have a tendency, if we practice at all in Lent, to be strangely casual about it, or see it as a scoresheet of success or failure, but it is intended to be an educational process - preparation by learning to resist - an opportunity to study the subtleties of temptation as it works itself out in us. What are its stages? What are *its* processes? When can we see it coming, and when has it outsmarted us before we realised the game was afoot? What are the tricks you are uniquely susceptible to? And what are the patterns common to us all? And what is the point of it? What is it designed to stop us from doing exactly?

The Gospel and the Garden reveal the heart and focus of this whole struggle, as we set off into the wilderness: that sin is falling short; that temptation is simply meant to stop us arriving at the thing we were made for, to stop us entering into the eternal life of love - by offering us illusory ways to guarantee it for ourselves, without dependence on God, or any reference to others.

Sin, ultimately, is anything that falls short of a living connection with the only source of life, and the true telos of our being - so if it can't be snatched away before it even *begins*, the most opportune moment to deflect righteousness from its course, is at the very *last* moment before it reaches its mark.

That's why temptation appears in Jesus ministry at the very beginning, and on the very brink of its fulfilment. And that's why in the temptation both of the original human beings, and of the consummate one - and of each of us - the most pernicious lure is the temptation to choose what is *almost* right. The most effective sabotage is the one that removes just one crucial element so that all the efforts of everything else are nothing worth. The most dangerous decoy is the almost perfect nearly true, that characterises the Snake's appeal to the Woman. We were *supposed* to be like God - more even, to become part of the Divine Life - and we *did* end up knowing good and evil, but not quite in the way Eve was led to understand either of those things.

Likewise, the almost perfect nearly true that characterises Satan's appeal to the last Adam. There is so little for the "true manna who came down from heaven" between 'turn these rocks into bread' and the feeding of the five thousand... So little for the one born to embody and transcend the Temple sacrifices, between throw yourself down from the roof of the Temple, and hand yourself over to the Temple authorities to be killed... So little for the one who is to be crowned King of Kings, between all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them - at the price of humbling yourself, and the triumphal entry as the Son of David or the ascent to the throne of the One who will be subject unto Him that put all things under him.

But then there is so little between breath and air, so little in the connection that makes the current surge through a circuit, and in the break that renders the whole apparatus inert.

And that, Lent wants to teach us, is the trick.

The New Testament - not the Old Covenant mind you, but the *New* - continually appeals to us to persevere, to overcome, to hold firm to the end, to not grow weary in doing good, to not turn back... Disturbingly conditional language we moderns don't care to think about much - because we know not just that 'all *have* fallen short', but that all *do*, continually. We know that if we claim we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. And that knowledge - which is revealed most alarmingly by temptation, by being tested - is the very logic of Lent. It is how Lent's twin focus - on temptation, and a fuller understanding of the Cross - in fact teach us just *one* thing: our encounter with temptation, it's showing us who we are now, draws us drives us back to the one who did persevere, who has overcome, who having been lifted up is drawing us to Himself, the one who has passed into the Holy of Holies, who ever lives to 'obtain for us by hitting the mark', the one whose blood purifies us from all sin, the one who is our propitiation for sin - Jesus Christ the Righteous.

So let us avail ourselves of every means at our disposal to bring us back to the truth of the Incarnation, back to the one sacrifice that is our anchor within the veil. Let us go to Mass day in day out, and repeat the same words over and over, and say those Offices, and read these the same passages of scripture year in and year out, and let us turn back through Lent time and again.

So that we might *be* turned time and again - back to the narrow path; taught time and again even those things we think we know - the truth about who we are, and the truth about how we come to be what God meant us to be.

Let us turn back to Jesus the Author and Perfecter of our faith, let us follow after so that we may apprehend that for which also we are apprehended of Christ - not counting ourselves to *have* apprehended: but reaching forth toward those things which are ahead, pressing toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.