

# Tribalism & Temptation

a sermon preached on the

## 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Lections: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

Lent presents us with a paradox: on the one hand, Lent is a *communal* experience, the liturgies only work when we do them together; on the other hand, the Lenten undertaking is also an intensely *individual* experience. In both respects Lent is like christian faith in general – there is always a tension, sometimes quite painful, between the communal ways and the individual's experience. Lent concentrates this tension, with its call to prayer and repentance, its disciplines of penitence, fasting, almsgiving. The gospel for the first Sunday in Lent, always the account of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness, exposes us to the tension. He is alone. No one is holding his hand. Not only are mother and father left well behind, so too family, friends, synagogue and Temple. In fact, the Spirit leads Jesus into a place where he must be free completely of the entire tribe of Israel and all its expectations.

The temptations set the tone for our Lent undertaking, as indeed they set the tone for Jesus' ministry. Jesus must face the devil alone – which means so, too, must we. In an era of ambivalent attitude towards solo efforts and 'lone guns', in the tension between the cult of personalities and the political correctness of 'team play', this aloneness is problematic. Nevertheless, Jesus must face the devil alone. And thus he is confronted with his own inner life, with his soul, because his first and most courageous task is to confront the powers not without, but within. The wilderness *without* corresponds exactly, in fact, with the wilderness *within*. The major battlefield is in the soul. This is the new religious quest, which has been long-promised and is now being enfleshed in Jesus. The real battle is not with Rome, nor with Gentiles, but within the individual soul.

Alone, in the desert of his own soul, Jesus undergoes temptation, for temptation is the necessary way of spiritual development, as this morning's well known Genesis story reveals – development of consciousness, the opening of eyes, comes through temptation. <sup>1</sup> "More than anyone else [Jesus] might have experienced the need of his prayer 'Lead us not into temptation.' In modern language this prayer says, 'Help us to become creative without being misled by our new possibilities.'" <sup>2</sup> Jesus *needs to be tempted* by the possibility of using his powers, the new human potential, for the wrong reasons, in the wrong ways. That which is described as 'devil' is the reality in Jesus' own soul of this potential misuse of power. Matthew's unique insight is that for Jesus the three greatest possible seductions are the 'Great Provider', the 'Great Priest', and the 'Great Conqueror'. <sup>3</sup>

"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." <sup>4</sup> The temptation of the Great Provider is that humankind can be fulfilled by material power. If there is bread for everyone then the hunger of all the poor can be satisfied. What a cunning lure this is, for who would not want all the hungry starving to be fed! And imagine the power of Jesus in the world if he were to feed everyone! But this great dream, hoped for by all the prophets, the passion of every crusader, has poisoned many a reform movement, has turned many a reformer into a tyrant. "Old Adam, well fed, remains as egocentric, ambitious and cruel as he ever was; the more bread he has, the more lazy he becomes, the less inclined to enter the painful struggle toward spiritual evolution." <sup>5</sup> Every empire has demonstrated that self-satisfaction and superiority are close companions of oppression, corruption and self-interest. *Jesus was not a prophet of materialism*, not even a prophet of what we call 'social justice'. To say this of Jesus is uncomfortable, especially among nice white Western liberals like me, for whom social justice has been an article of religion.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 3:7

<sup>2</sup> Kunkel F, *Creation Continues: A Psychological Interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987, p51.

<sup>3</sup> Kunkel F, p52.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 4:3

<sup>5</sup> Kunkel F, p53.

“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down [from the pinnacle of the temple].”<sup>6</sup> The temptation of the Great Priest is the lure of magic, miracles, voodoo. This is the temptation to use divine power as an instrument under human control, to spare us from the laws of physics and biology, with Sunday-by-Sunday reproducibility. One of the great ironies of the 16<sup>th</sup> century reformations is that the legitimate protest against medieval magic resulted in a deluge of fragmenting religious movements every bit as voodoo-oriented. Those who make much of the charismatic revivals of the 1970s or the numerical explosion of Christianity in Africa, for instance, conveniently ignore this fact.

Tea leaves, tarot cards, and a great deal that passes for ‘prayer’ have a common ground in the ubiquitous religious voodoo. If God’s powers can be harnessed for my gain, used predictably like mathematical laws or electricity, God is no longer free and human freedom and maturity is lost. The God to whom such prayers are directed is not the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, but a voodoo god. “The more we need miracles, the more we sink into spiritual slavery. The nearer we come to spiritual maturity, the more we are opposed to miracles, and the less we need them.”<sup>7</sup> Jesus refused to be the great priest-magician others had hoped for. Whenever he was forced to use his ‘miraculous’ powers he went to some length to avoid all publicity. And when it came to his own life, Jesus rejected miraculous powers altogether!<sup>8</sup>

“All [these kingdoms of the world and their splendour] I will give you.”<sup>9</sup> The temptation of the Great Conqueror is the lure of Israel’s expectations of the long-awaited King-Messiah, the heroic ideal. “The hope and love of millions of people is invested in this ideal,”<sup>10</sup> as any viewing of the media, and any honest assessment of our own hearts and much church rhetoric, powerfully attests. “Yet [Jesus] refused this way. By his decision Jesus condemned nationalism and imperialism once and for all as a way of further human evolution.”<sup>11</sup> To Pilate’s question “Are you King of the Jews?” Jesus enigmatically responded, “You have said so.”<sup>12</sup> ‘Christendom’ was and is a betrayal of Jesus. Thus, Jesus refuses the role of the King-Messiah.

Jesus had to face these three great temptations. In this way Jesus rejected the three principal ideals of his time: the materialism of the Sadducees, the spiritual totalitarianism of the Pharisees, and the power policy of Rome. These are the ideals of the collective, of the community, the family, the tribe, the nation. In order to confront them and reject them it was necessary for Jesus to remove himself from the collective, to withdraw from the tribe and nation, there to encounter the devilish power of these temptations *within his own soul*. It was necessary to encounter his own inner devil, the one who could misuse power. Adam’s sin was not that his eyes were opened, which was necessary for the evolution of human consciousness, but that he refused to take responsibility for his own maturity.<sup>13</sup> Jesus remains a Jew, belongs to a tribe, lives in a nation, yet he must be separated from all this, for the sake of both freedom and responsibility.

Thus, spiritual evolution, the birth of the new Adam, is an individual experience which requires separation from the tribe, in which the old practices, hopes and expectations of the tribe must be completely overcome. “If creation were to continue, [Jesus] had to find a new way altogether, and this had to be based on a new relationship to the Eternal.”<sup>14</sup> The new task could no longer be expressed in the old language, could not be defined by the expectations and hopes of tribe and nation. And by our baptism into his death and resurrection Jesus’ way must be our way. Lent is a symbol for this task of the individual soul.

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 4:6

<sup>7</sup> Kunkel F, pp54-5.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 27:40

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 4:9

<sup>10</sup> Kunkel F, p53.

<sup>11</sup> Kunkel F, p53,54.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 27:11

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 3:12

<sup>14</sup> Kunkel F, P55.