

## A Sermon for Lent 1, 21 February, 2021, St Margaret of Antioch, Leigh-on-Sea

Testing comes in many different forms and we all have our own memories, sometimes traumatic memories, of what it means to be tested.

Probably many of us will have memories of our driving test. In my case, I took my test in London a week before we were due to move to Salisbury. The pressure was on: failure would mean starting with a new instructor in a new area.

It was a make/break situation and I vividly recall the experience of being caught behind the milk-float at the bottom of a steep hill and wondering whether the examiner would be more likely to mark me down for overtaking (it was the bottom of a tall hill) *or* for procrastinating and holding us up.

At the end, I was left wondering whether God was intervening when the examiner said, 'I'm passing you, but I don't know why!'

'Peirazo', the NT word for 'tempt' can equally be translated 'test' or 'prove'. Perhaps today as we consider St Mark's account of Our Lord's 40 days in the Wilderness, it is a good moment to consider what it meant for Him to be tested there. St Mark lacks the details of Matthew & Luke about His particular temptations to turn stones to bread, jump from the temple roof or bargain, for political power. The more detailed, more conversational accounts encourage us to think about the personal and seductive allure of Satan's invitation to sin, to follow a path which life experience confirms to us is deadly. It may be that, instead, Mark points us to something even more profound.

Very often when we think of the word 'temptation', we're more likely to think of the motive of the tempter – the one who wants to undermine our will, entice us into doing what we wouldn't do in other circumstances, wanting what we shouldn't want. The dialogue or conversational nature of those accounts of Our Lord, the Second Adam, should remind us of the way in which sin originally entered the world. As the First Adam, the representative Man, and his wife, stood by the Tree of Knowledge of Good & Evil, they also were engaged in conversation by the Evil One, known in some texts as 'the Angel of Testing'.

Here, in Mark, we can take a step back. Without the conversation, without the enticing, we're better able to consider the Lord's forty-day experience more as a Test. If we're able, we can accept the invitation to view His wilderness experience through another Biblical lens that may shed new light on our observance of Lent. After all, there's been a lot about the last year that's felt like Lent!

The first thing we notice abt St Mark's account of OL in the wilderness is how it might almost be included in the same paragraph, even the same breath, as His Baptism. As He emerges from the waters, the Spirit descends upon Him. Almost in the same action, Mark tells us **'the Spirit drove Him out into the wilderness'**. In other words, God the Holy Trinity was as much at work in His going into the wilderness, as it was in the initiation of His Ministry.

There, alone, in the searing, unbearable heat, 'he remained for forty days tempted by Satan'. Whereas, Matthew & Luke seem to describe a dramatic episode, Mark in telling us less, implies something much more extensive and everyday, a spiritual assault course to tax the resilience even of the Son of God.

It's the 'Test', as opposed to 'Enticement' that occurs again and again through the New Testament both for the Lord and the first generation.

The Pharisees are found regularly asking Jesus questions 'to test' Him: they regularly challenge him to show them a sign of his divinity, to put Him on the spot with a difficult/impossible question. The same term is used of the early Christian experience.

St Peter, from whom St Mark is believed to have taken his account of Christ's life, writes five chapters of his first letter on the subject of what it meant for Christians to be subjected to persecution in the City of Rome.

**'This is cause for great joy, even though for a little while you may have had to suffer trials of many kinds. Even gold passes through the assayer' fire, and much more precious than perishable gold is faith which stands the test.'**

Similarly, the Apostle James begins his epistle by referring to testing:

**'My friends, whenever you have to face allsorts of trials, count yourselves supremely happy in the knowledge that such testing of your faith makes for strength to endure.'**

As we embark on our Lenten observance, something wld be lacking if we focused exclusively on the things that tempt us, episodes where we succumb to sin's allure: Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Sloth, Wrath, Envy and Pride.

We might ask what are the bigger issues in my life? Where else might else am I being put to the test? From what situations am I wanting to escape, yet not knowing how? Psychologists famously talk about the alternatives of flight/fight.

When every part of my body might be telling me that 'flight' is the answer, might God be very inconveniently telling me to stay and 'fight'? to stay and pray?

Might it be that the Divine Love is waiting for you and I to invite Him in, that, like Jesus, we need to be filled afresh with the Holy Spirit to stand up to the test? How could we overlook Him, who reaches out to us like a Lover, who is there to enlighten us in moments of darkness, to inspire us in moments of fear, to console us when we fail, and to strengthen us when we need to pick ourselves up again?

When I feel like my back is against the wall and God has forsaken me, might this be the very moment that God is testing whether I will dare to trust that His Holy Spirit will bring good out of it?

A seeker after truth came to a saint for guidance. The saint was typically a man of few words.

"Tell me, wise one, how did you become holy?" asked the seeker.

"Two words."

"And what are they, please?"

**"Right choices."**

The seeker was fascinated. "How does one learn to choose rightly?"

The saint said, "One word."

What's that, said the seeker,

The saint said: **"Growth."**

The seeker was thrilled. "How does one grow?"

"Two words."

"What are they, pray tell?"

**"Wrong choices."**

Being perfect, Our Lord didn't need to make wrong choices to know the path to Wisdom, whereas we might. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews saw His unique path as qualifying Him for His role as our great High Priest:

**'Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every way, so that he might be merciful and faithful as their high priest before God, to make expiation for the sins of the people. Because He Himself has passed through the test of suffering, he is able to help those who are in the midst of their test.'**

The Spirituality of the Desert directs us to deal not only with the enticements which lead us to commit sins, but to experience the joy and strength of His Holy Spirit in the season of testing.

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