

Comment

The Gospel reading for the first Sunday of Lent is always taken from Matthew's or Mark's or Luke's account of Jesus being led into the desert to be tempted by Satan. He is tempted to settle for something less than absolute reliance on the living God alone, by seeking cheap success and hollow popularity in futile miracles, (ordering stones to turn into bread), gimmicky circus stunts, (throwing himself without damage from the highest point of the Temple), and by the lure of false power and greatness, (All the kingdoms of the world in all their greatness I will give you). The struggle and victory over these temptations purified Jesus' vision of his mission and led him on the path of service. The climax of Lent reminds us that that path ended in conflict, suffering and death.

It is clear from the Gospels that many people found Jesus compellingly attractive; an attraction compelled by his compassion, the hope he gave to the sorrowful and the deprived, the health he gave to the infirm, the forgiveness he lavished on sinners and the weak in those eating and drinking sessions. The paradox of Jesus is that this attractive man should have generated such conflict. Why did his path, so littered with inspiring words and tender touches of healing, gestures of compassion and meals of forgiveness, lead to conflict and Calvary?

Surely the answer lies somewhere in that although compassion, tenderness, forgiveness and love are the hallmarks of his divine ministry, Jesus never courted popularity, approval or respectability as signs of success, especially not from the religious and political establishment of his time. On the contrary, it was his single-minded devotion to his godly mission and to the marginalised people whom he sought out to be the beneficiaries of it, (the lost sheep of the house of Israel), which brought him into conflict with the scribes and pharisees and rulers of the people. The conflict and struggle he experienced in the desert dogged him throughout his public life; not as personal struggle, but rather as struggle with those who would de-humanise man by de-divinising God and substituting an idol.

It is also clear from the Gospels that Jesus envisaged that his disciples would find themselves caught up in a similar kind of struggle; the personal struggle of purifying our priorities, (our desert), and also the public struggle of mediating Jesus to the world. Jesus expected that his disciples would find themselves inevitably caught up in conflict. 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake . . . Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Mt. 5:10 and 44), and 'Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets' (Lk. 6:26).

Lent is the Church's annual reminder that right at the heart of christian discipleship and the Church's mission is an inescapable conflict with evil, which takes us miles away from gimmicky groping after trendy success and popularity. 'Lord, protect us in our struggle against evil', we pray in the collect for Ash Wednesday. Our attempts to love will bring us up against our personal sins, (precisely our particular obstacles to love), and also the evils and injustices in our society, (precisely those structures which are obstacles to a genuine community of shared love).

Our constant snare, as individual christians and as a church, is to court respectability, approval and popularity either by paying attention only to personal sin and ignoring social sin, or by attempting to face social evils without getting our hands dirty. We tend to imagine that the radical commandment to love lifts us out of the area of conflict, or that by making love our aim we will avoid the messy business of making enemies. But loving our enemies does not stop them being our enemies, certainly Jesus himself had no such luck. But that didn't stop him being attractive. Our problem is that we can confuse being attractive with being nice and popular and respectable, wanting 'all men to speak well of us'. That was not the path of Jesus, and for us to be enticed down it endangers the message of Easter, making it into a cheap and pious illusion.

Alban Weston O. P.