

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

In 1981, prisoners belonging to Irish Republican paramilitary groups began a series of rolling hunger strikes in order to protest the condition of their detainment. In the end, ten of the hunger strikers died after refusing any food for periods of between 46 and 73 days. Several prisoners who participated, but who ultimately survived, also fasted for very long periods of time, notably Jacky McMullan (48 days), Matt Devlin (52 days), Liam McCloskey and Patrick Sheehan (each 55 days), and Laurence McKeown, who lasted a whopping 70 days. The hunger strikers of the 1980s were following in the footsteps of their forebears. Decades earlier, during the Irish Civil War of 1919-21, Terence MacSwiney (the Lord Mayor of Cork) died after a hunger strike of 74 days, while fellow revolutionary Joseph Murphy succumbed to severe malnourishment after 76 days. In 1929, Bhagat Singh, an Indian political prisoner, ended his hunger strike – again, a protest over the conditions of imprisonment – after 116 days. But all these fasts are dwarfed by the fast commenced in June 1965 by Scotsman Angus Barbieri. Barbieri fasted for a total of 382 days, during which time he consumed only vitamins, electrolytes, and zero-calorie beverages such as tea and coffee.

Why have I told you this? I hope that you have an inkling, but all shall be made clear in good time. In this morning's gospel we heard that after Jesus' baptism: 'the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan...' I said six weeks ago that Saint Mark's account of the baptism of Christ is of the 'blink and you'll miss it' variety; the same could be said about his account of the temptation of Jesus. The evangelist gives us the bones, the outline, of the story – a length of time (forty days), a place (the wilderness), and a vague description of what occurred (tempted by Satan); but if we wish to fill in the outline, to give it some colour and definition, we need to turn to Saints Matthew and Luke. From Matthew and Luke's accounts we can recognize that Jesus underwent three discreet temptations: first, Satan challenges Jesus to prove that he is God's Son by turning stones into bread; second, Satan took Jesus to the pinnacle of the Jerusalem Temple and challenges him to prove that he is God's Son by throwing himself off in order that God's angels might bear him up; third, Satan takes Jesus to the top of a very high mountain and really throws down the gauntlet – he shows Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

Too often I think that Christians read the Temptation narrative as a proof text, or a piece of evidence, for the divinity of Jesus – the fact that he was able to fast for forty days being generally thought of as beyond the physical capacity of someone who is merely human. But, as I hope I have adequately demonstrated, fasting for forty days by no means makes Jesus divine in and of

itself, any more than it made Angus Barbieri, Bhagat Singh, Joseph Murphy, or Laurence McKeown divine.

I also think that Christians have a rather unfortunate tendency, in no small part due to the influence of Christian art, to read back into the gospel narratives an image of the resurrected, ascended, and glorified Jesus, Jesus at the right hand of Father, rather than seeing Jesus the human being – the Galilean peasant who had not only a human body, with all its attendant physical limitations, but also a human mind, a human heart, and a human will. If we fail to acknowledge this we run the risk of making the Temptation of Jesus little more than a really quite bizarre pantomime – the Godman who has no need of food or drink goes out to the wilderness for unspecified reasons and there encounters His mortal enemy, each of whose facile temptations he roundly dismisses with a verse from the Book of Deuteronomy. Not only does such a reading make a mockery of the Temptation, it makes a mockery of the entire narrative of the Passion – Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus' arrest, and his exclamation from the cross – 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'.

In going out into the wilderness to fast and pray, Jesus was following in the footsteps of the prophets – Moses fasted for forty days and forty nights when he received the revelation on Mount Sinai, and Elijah fasted for forty days and forty nights during his journey to the same mountain, whereupon he encountered God in the still small voice of calm. Jesus' motive to fast and pray probably weren't all that different to Elijah's, if you think about it. Both Elijah and Jesus find themselves at the centre of a dramatic revelatory event. Elijah has the dramatic encounter with the prophets of Baal where the Lord reveals himself in the form of divine fire from heaven, while at Jesus' baptism in the Jordan he finds himself smack bang in the middle of *the* theophany – God's first full self-revelation in the three persons of the Trinity.

I suspect that Jesus went out into the wilderness to fast and pray in the hope of figuring out what it all means. It was likely in the wilderness, after enduring the very real temptations of Satan that Jesus began to recognise that he was in fact Israel's long-awaited messiah. It was likely in the wilderness that Jesus realised that he would be, in his own person, the means of reconciling humanity to God. It was likely in the wilderness that Jesus realised that he had to die in order to accomplish the work which the Father had apportioned for him. There's a reason why Jesus answers the temptations of Satan by quoting Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy is the Book of the Torah *par excellence*, which spells out how to be truly human; that is, how to be in right relationship with God and your neighbour. Jesus was able to resist the Temptations of the Devil not because of His divinity, nor in spite of His humanity, but because true humanity is to follow the will of God; in the language of the Book of Deuteronomy, keeping His commandments, His ordinances, and His statutes and walking in His ways. This is a point which C.S. Lewis expressed particularly well when he said that, in Jesus, "For the first time we saw a real man. One tin soldier – real tin, just like the rest – had come fully and splendidly alive."

I believe Jesus of Nazareth was God incarnate, but I also believe, as Bishop Charles Gore suggested at the turn of the 20th century, that when Christ became incarnate he so emptied himself of divine attributes – as the Apostle Paul says in his Letter to the Ephesians – that He became subject to all human limitations and stripped himself of all attributes of divinity, including omniscience, and that His divine nature was hidden under the human nature. We shouldn't miss the significance of this fact with respect to the matter at hand: Jesus, as a hungry, thirsty, weary man – possessing a human heart, a human mind, a human will – succeeded where Adam and Eve failed, paving the way for our reconciliation with God.

Each Lent the church encourages us to emulate our Lord in fasting as a way of, in the words of the collect for this Sunday, subduing the flesh to the Spirit. As always, I'm off to a shaky start – I just cannot seem to help myself but to pick at Henry's dinner if he leaves any. But, the purpose of Lent isn't to give up at the first stumble, but to get up, keep going, and to try and work on our respective relationships with God. And if it doesn't go precisely as planned, that's okay, the important thing is that we try, keeping in mind always those profound words of comfort from the Letter to the Hebrews:

*Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.*

And again:

*...we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.*

And thank God for that.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*