

June 13, 2010

Third Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Students of Holy Scripture have long recognized that Matthew and Luke describe Jesus' temptations in a way that contrasts His obedience in the desert with the disobedience of ancient Israel.

Both evangelists, in spite of differently arranging their narrative sequences, apparently relied on a common source, according to which our Lord quoted the Book of Deuteronomy in response to each of the three temptations. This sustained appeal to the final book of the Torah---invoked as a weapon to resist temptation---summons the memory of Israel's moral failings during its forty years of desert wandering.

The immediate context of the accounts furthers this purpose: The parallel between Jesus' Baptism and the passage through the Red Sea is followed immediately by the correspondence between the temptations of Jesus and Israel in the desert. (Mark also adheres to this sequence.)

For convenience, let us arbitrarily limit our attention to the Lord's temptations in the Lukan format:

Jesus meets the first temptation---"If You are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread"---by declaring, "Man shall not live by bread alone." This verse is lifted from the middle of Deuteronomy 8:1-6, which refers to ancient Israel's murmuring at the loss of their (alleged) better diet in Egypt (Exodus 16; Numbers 11).

Jesus answers the second temptation---the promise of world domination in exchange for fealty to Satan---by affirming, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve." This verse appears within Deuteronomy 6:10-15, in reference to Israel's repeated disposition to seek advantage by worshipping alien gods (12:30-31; Exodus 23:23-33).

Jesus responds to the third temptation---"Throw yourself down from here"---by proclaiming, "You shall not tempt the Lord your God." This text, Deuteronomy 6:16, refers to Israel's constant disposition to tempt the Lord in the desert (cf. Exodus 17:1-7).

In all His temptations in the wilderness, then, the faithful response of Jesus is placed in direct contrast to Israel's infidelity during those forty sinful years of wandering.

This opposition between the faith and obedience of Jesus and the infidelity and disobedience of Israel is reminiscent of an earlier correspondence between the desert experiences of Israel and David. This narrative parallel is not as schematic, explicit, and sustained as the Gospel accounts, but I think it not less interesting:

First, David's wanderings are forced on him by King Saul, the story's Pharaoh, as it were, who harasses the young man he regards as a rival. David flees to the desert, trusting his destiny to the mercy of God. During this period his soul is tried and purged, to render him worthy of the anointing he has received (1 Samuel 16:13).

Second, in his desert journey David suffers hunger but without complaint or murmuring. The Lord's priest feeds him with the sacred "Bread of the Presence" (21:3-6), corresponding to the heavenly Manna which nourished Israel of old.

Third, matching the ancient Amalekites (Exodus 17), Edomites (Numbers 17), and others who made themselves Israel's enemies in the wilderness, the Philistines and the Ziphites assail and threaten the safety of David and his troupe (1 Samuel 23).

David's more serious trial is spiritual, and this in two ways:

First, he is tempted to imitate the arrogance and cruelty of Saul. We perceive this moral danger in the remarkably similar exhortations of Jonathan to Saul and Abigail to David. In each case the angry man---disposed to act with violence unworthy of a king---is lovingly warned not to kill "without cause" (1 Samuel 19:5; 25:31).

Second, David is tempted to hasten the time of his ascent to the throne, instead of patiently waiting for the Lord's deliverance. Abishai is the spokesman for this temptation, when he says of Saul, "Now therefore, please, let me strike him at once with the spear, right to the earth; and I will not have to strike him a second time!"

David's response expresses his faith that God will act at the proper time: "As the Lord lives, the Lord shall strike him, or his day shall come to die, or he shall go out to battle and perish. The Lord forbid that I should stretch out my hand against the Lord's anointed" (26:8-11). David, thus, refuses to seize what he knows can only be received as a gift. In his fidelity in the desert, he reverses the course followed by Israel of old.

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