

20140309Lent1Sermon – Vanity Fair – Jesus’ Temptations

I don’t know how many of you have read Pilgrim’s Progress by John Bunyan. It is the story of a dream the author has in which he sees a man who travels on a pilgrimage from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. On the route he encounters many friends and foes, many exciting and tempting places and events. Of course, it is an allegory of any Christian's life journey, in fact the hero is even called Christian and he is accompanied on this first part of his journey by a friend called Faithful.

They reach a town called Vanity where there is a fair held all year round

THEN I saw in my dream that when Christian and Faithful had come out of the Wilderness, they immediately saw ahead of them a Town which was named Vanity. Now at this Town, a fair is promoted there that is known as Vanity Fair. It is maintained all the year long and bears the name Vanity Fair because the Town where it is located is regarded as lighter than vanity; and also, because all that is sold there, as well as those who come to buy, is vanity.

Vanity Fair is in fact this world with its gala dress on, it displays this world’s most seductive sensual allurements. It is our world in miniature, with its various temptations. It is Satan’s theme park and world of carnal dreams.

Those attending the Fair seek the allurements of this world – material goods, its lusts and pleasures. But if Christian and Faithful are following the King's highway why does it run through such a place? Paul writing to the Corinthians said: *I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons— not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since you would then need to go out of the world.* What’s the famous phrase “in the world not of the world”? We have to face these temptations and we, like Jesus in the Gospel, have to resist.

Bunyan writes: *The Prince of Princes himself, when travelling in this region, passed through this Town when heading toward his own country... Yes, and I believe it was Beelzebub, the chief Lord of this Fair, who personally invited him to buy some of his vanities; yes, he would have even made him a Lord of this Fair if only the Prince had bowed to his overall authority while passing through the Town. Further, because he was such a person of honour, Beelzebub escorted him from street to street and showed him, in a short space of time, all the kingdoms of the world so that he might lure the Blessed One to lower himself and buy some of his vanities. But this Stranger had no desire whatsoever for this merchandise, and therefore he departed from the Town without spending so much as one cent on these worthless goods.* It sounds more than familiar when compared to today’s gospel, doesn’t it?

For Jesus, the “Prince of Princes” it was necessary to encounter Vanity Fair and so be enabled to identify himself with human frailty. As the writer to the Hebrews says: *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one **who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.***

In today’s Gospel Jesus is in the desert and is being tempted. There is a striking contrast between Jesus in the Wilderness and our ancestors in the Garden of Eden in the First Reading. Both tempted by Satan. Yet Adam and Eve fall and Jesus resists. The sin of ancestors starts the whole process that culminates with the coming of Jesus to restore our relationship with God. Rather fascinatingly the Easter Hymn the *Exultet* has the words “Oh happy **fault** of Adam!” – a fault that was a happy one because it meant the Son of God would come to earth. The weakness of our ancestors brought about the coming of Jesus and all that he means to us for our lives. It is an example of how even behind unpleasant and, in fact, evil happenings God’s love can be found at work.

Just as the Pilgrim's Progress is a allegory, it is not necessary for us to understand either the Garden of Eden story or Jesus’ experience with Satan as being strictly historical. These stories are primarily vehicles to communicate important truths to us.

Today's Gospel story follows immediately on Jesus' baptism and endorsement by his Father as his "Beloved Son" to whom we are to listen.

Note that Jesus is led into the desert **by** the Spirit of God. The purpose clearly is not to lead him to do evil but as a testing of his fitness for his coming mission. Christian is tested as he journeys from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. He is being tried and tested as Jesus was, as Adam and Eve were. Will Jesus fail like our ancestors, Adam and Eve? Or even like the Israelites of old? Or will he prove himself worthy of the mission he has been given?

The testing is done by the Evil One, the Tempter. Unlike Christian who was in a city which sounds so wonderful and exciting with its Vanity Fair, Jesus is in the Wilderness, a barren region between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea. Jesus, like Moses before him, had fasted for 40 days. He is alone in the wilderness without food. He is hungry, weak and vulnerable. Now is the time for the Tempter to move in.

Each of the three temptations touches on Jesus' identity as the Son of God, which had been revealed during his baptism. "This is my Beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

The Tempter then begins, "If you are the Son of God, why not use your divine powers to turn these large, flat stones at your feet into bread?" God fed the Israelites with manna in the desert. Surely he will feed his own Son? Why have powers and not use them? Why not take this opportunity to prove that you really are the Son of God?

It is important to realise that all temptations – and these tests are no exception – come to us under the guise of some kind of goodness. Christian walking through Vanity Fair on the King's Highway is greeted as a stranger with friendliness but when he takes strong exception to the goods being sold and to the salesmen, he puts their backs up and they gang up on him and his companion Faithful getting them arrested. There is always a little goodness in people until you tell them you disapprove of them. No sane person chooses the purely evil unless some positive benefit is seen to come from it. That is why they are called Temptations. In each of the three tests today, Jesus is being led on to do something which would seem to enhance his mission as Lord and Saviour.

In responding to the Tempter, Jesus will not just use his own words but each time quote a saying from the Hebrew scriptures. In this first test Jesus rejects the offer by saying, that "it is not on bread alone that we live". True happiness does not consist in satisfying material wants, in having many things, but in identifying ourselves fully with the vision of life which God gives us through Jesus.

Satan's next approach is to bring Jesus to the highest point of the Temple in Jerusalem. Surely here God will take care of God's Son. "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down." Jesus has just shown his trust in God by not changing the stones into bread. Now here is a chance really to prove that trust.

It is the Tempter himself who cleverly quotes Scripture: "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone." God promises God's providential care in the normal course of our lives but God never promises supernatural intervention when we do something unreasonable. "God takes care of those who take care of themselves."

After the failure of the first two attempts, Satan now drops all pretence. He brings Jesus to a high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world. All this can be Jesus', if he falls down and worships the Tempter. Is not this what Jesus wants: to bring all the kingdoms of the world into his own Kingdom? Is that not the purpose of his whole life?

It is, of course, an impossible bargain. It would make no sense for the whole world to submit itself to Jesus as Lord and then for Jesus himself to submit to the Evil One. Yet, it is a bargain we constantly try to make: to belong to God and to go to any lengths to get the things we want: material wealth, success, a recognised standing in the eyes of others... All the things available to Christian at that Vanity Fair.

Jesus will put it differently later on: What does it profit someone to gain the whole world and lose their real life? What can one give in exchange for the deep relationship with God for which we were born? Jesus absolutely rejects the offer: "Away from me, Satan!"

Do you realise that in his life Jesus does all the things he is tempted to do by the Tempter? Jesus did produce large quantities of bread on two occasions but not for himself but rather to feed the hungry. He rejected calls from his opponents to prove who he was by performing some striking signs. He said the only sign would be his own death and resurrection. Jesus passes all three tests and will continue to do so all during his life right up to the moment of his death. In the garden of Gethsemane, he will beg to be spared the horrors of his Passion but will then put aside his own fears of suffering and death and accept his Father's way. On the cross he will make the despairing cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and soon after, in total submission, say: "Into your hands I surrender my life."

The way of the Father is the only way that will lead him – and us – to the life that never ends and where all tears will be wiped away. It is by following the way of life of the Prince of Princes that will bring Christian and his companion closer to the Celestial City. Bunyan wrote: *Now as I said, these pilgrims must necessarily pass through this Fair. ... They did not even care to browse at the goods; and if they were solicited to buy such items, they would put their fingers in their ears and cry out, "Turn away my eyes from beholding vanity". So beholding the strange behaviour of these men, one scornful trader happened to address them: "What will you buy?" But the pilgrims soberly replied, "We buy the truth."*

Bunyan tells us that God, who *overrules all things, having the power of their rage in the palm of his hand, ordered events in such a way that Christian was enabled, on that occasion, to escape from the Town and continue on his way.*

We all have been tempted by the goods for sale at our own Vanity Fair wherever and whatever that may be. Perhaps like Christian and Faithful we have stood up for the Truth and perhaps suffered severely. Perhaps like Christian, God ordered events so that we could continue our journey towards the Celestial City. But remember that Jesus, the Prince of Princes has also passed through the Fair of Vanity and no discouragement made him once relent to be a pilgrim.

Sing verse one hymn 212