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A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php

In Quarantine

Text: Jesus was then led away by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil

A Sermon by J. H. Withers

At a muddy bend of the Jordan's sluggish river our guide pointed out the spot which a long tradition has accepted as the place where Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. Quietly we stood there, allowing our imaginations to recall that momentous event which was the divine signal for the Christ-mission to begin. Here Jesus identified himself with sinful men, whose hearts in secret were crying out for cleansing and life. It was Holy Ground - Holy Water.

Then we travelled back to Jericho, to the site of a series of cities, built on top of each other, close by a small oasis, watered by "Elisha's Stream", which encouraged the fig and olive trees to put out their green curtains to conceal the brown dearth of the surrounding desert. Slowly we climbed the hill to look down at the work of skilled archaeologists, who have uncovered the relics of successive civilisations. Away in the distance towered a rugged mountain with a small Greek monastery perilously perched on its precipitous slopes. "What is that Mountain?" I asked the guide who immediately replied, "That is Quarantina, the mount of our Lord's temptations." This name was apparently given to it by French missionaries long ago to indicate the "Forty Days" of the temptation - and I had just enough French to remember that "Quarante" means forty!

Many years ago British soldiers fighting outside Ypres, named one of the bloody battlefields, "Hill 60". We were now gazing on "Hill 40", and we thought again of Jesus alone with his thoughts for forty days and nights in that barren wilderness. And what a wilderness it seemed to us with its rows of huts for Palestinian refugees in the foreground and a dark desolation behind. This was certainly the devil's natural habitat.

It is an appropriate name, Quarantina, for it suggests our Quarantine - the forty days of isolation, which was formerly demanded of a ship entering port if there was any suspicion of an infectious disease aboard. The warning

flag was run up the mast and the crew were kept aboard.

We read that, after the spiritual illumination of the baptism when Jesus was made conscious of his unique relationship with God ("This is my Son"), the Spirit led him away to the isolation of a mountain to be tested. But note that the Greek verb (παραλαμβάνω) means 'to take along with you', suggesting that heaven (Spirit and Angels) would support him in his quarantine, and burn out the infectious bacteria of worldly values. Thus he came down from the mountain with a new moral immunity, which lights up the nature of our Lord's sinlessness. It was not that he could not sin but rather that he was able not to sin. Sinlessness was an achievement.

Later, in his own inimitable poetic way, Jesus must have told his disciples something of that great soul-struggle in which he won a victory over the world. It was told them to give them strength in the days of their own temptations, in the days of their own quarantine. The beginning of that battle took place on "Hill 40".

As Doris Lessing's play suggests, "Each is his own wilderness", for every man alone has to fight for his soul, to find his direction in life, and to choose the values that will guide him; yet not entirely alone for the Spirit and the angels of God will come and minister to him, as they did to Jesus in his lonely eyrie. We dare not, however, reverse the scripture to suggest that we are in all points tempted like as he was, for we move on an infinitely lower plane of being. But there are points in our testing which seem to me to be a dim reflection of his, and these are worth more than a passing glance.

1. In the wilderness there is the temptation to doubt our status.

In that lonely quarantine twice the devil introduced his subtle insinuations with the phrase, "If thou be the Son of God". "If!" (The word "insinuate" has within it the writhing of the Serpent). This was to cast a shadow of doubt over the conviction which had been confirmed at the baptism when Jesus heard the voice of God saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved". Now his mind was questioning his divine status, as though to say, "Am I really God's Son?"

He had been called to fulfil a mission of love which would involve suffering and death, the price of sonship, and nothing must be allowed to deflect him from that holy function. You can see now why Jesus turned on Peter with passionate indignation, on that famous day when Peter tried to dissuade him from the path of the Cross. "Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not happen to thee". "Get behind me, Satan." Jesus remembered his quarantine and now Peter was trying to return him to it. His status was given him by God and he would not reject it.

As H.A. Williams in one of his published sermons has written, "Behind all temptation is the temptation to disbelieve in what we are, to distrust ourselves." Two things at least are involved in this.

(a) At the foundation of life, we have to recognize that we are human, and yet we are constantly tempted to deny that status, as we callously dismiss the claims which it makes upon us. To be human is to belong to the human family, to accept others as our brothers and sisters, to acknowledge their dependence on us and ours on them, and to share with them the good things of God's providing in a more just world. Race discrimination, religious intolerance, social ostracism, these all constitute a denial of our common humanity. Sin indeed I would define as anything which diminishes our status as human. The New English Bible with a rare insight translates the commandment in Leviticus, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."

(b) But, deeper still, we are to acknowledge our status as children of God, the One God, a status which gives dignity and purpose to our lives, and without which we cease to be human. We are tempted to do something else, to turn our backs on what God has revealed to us over the years and centuries, to become something less than his children. In that moment of temptation, and God knows it is a fierce temptation in Ireland at this moment, we may well pray for the Spirit and Angels to give us strength to answer, "Get behind me, Satan!" Only the grace of God, mediated through the Spirit, can give us immunity from the infective denial of our divine status.

2. Again, in the wilderness there is the Temptation to accept false standards of success.

The three pictures in the Temptation story all deal with this in an impressive way. To turn stones into bread on the face of it seemed just what the compassionate heart of Jesus would want to do, as he thought of the hungry children of the world, distressed and despised. To meet their needs with bread would surely be an inexpressible success. But Jesus saw at once that to make his mission a bread-mission would merely summon people to "come to the cookhouse-door, boys." Or he could cast himself down like a grand Houdini from the Temple tower and land safely in a divine parachute with the crowds applauding his prowess. It was a dream picture that clothed the temptation to seek for success in a popular appeal. From the mountain-top was spread out a panorama of nations, and he could hold them in thrall if he exercised his incredible powers of persuasion and force, adopting the techniques of worldly dictators. If he worshipped the values of the world, he could achieve superlative political success.

Now obviously all this was on a plane far above us and our visions of success look sordid and selfish in comparison. Success for Jesus was to complete his God-given task of humble service, involving as it did the pain and passion of Calvary. When on that Cross he cried out, "Tetelestai" - It is finished", he had found the ultimate success of his life for he had completed the divine task. Many years ago I read a sermon by H.H. Farmer of Cambridge on "The Success of Wrong Values" in which he wrote, "The terrible thing about wrong values is not that we do not get what we want, but that we so very often do!" Disraeli once said, "There is nothing a man cannot have if only he desires it enough."

If we set out for worldly success, making that our summum bonum, adopting the pagan techniques with unquestioning allegiance, there is no reason why we should not win it, for God will not necessarily stop us. But when Jesus saw a man achieving material success at the expense of personal character and love and compassion, he trembled for that man's ultimate future. We cannot easily forget the verdict on the Rich Fool - "Fool!" - for indeed he was a poor little rich man. It is as though Jesus said, "The worst thing that ever happened to that man was that he

was successful." Nothing fails so easily as success.

In our quarantine we had better examine our ambitions. Ambition is an interesting word, for the Latin verb "ambio" is a political word, referring to a candidate "going round" to canvass votes to fulfil his overweening ambitions. The Christian man's ambition is to seek and fulfil the will of God for him so that at the last he can return to his trust to the God who gave it, with the confident assurance of the divine approval.

3. Once more, there is the temptation in the wilderness to seek a false security. We have suggested that our Lord's temptations involved his status and his success; now we move into the realm of security.

I have often wondered what passed through our Lord's mind during that period of quarantine on the mountain-top. Was he struggling for security? This after all is a consuming passion for all men, and he is a rare exception who does not strive to win security which will protect him from "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." "Stones into bread" - what can be stronger than economic security which fills our larders with desirable commodities? "Cast thyself down from the pinnacle of the temple" - and how secure one can feel when surrounded by a crowd of adoring spectators, the darling of every eye. "All these nations will I give thee" - and what security in the quest of one's worldly ambitions the possession of political power can bring.

Don't we spend most of our life in the endless search for security? The little boy safe in his mother's arms grows stronger and begins to find his security in the gang outside his home. Then at the end of his turbulent adolescence he seeks for security in the love of a good woman and later in marriage he makes his home the rampart of his life. By middle life he invests all his profits in gilt edged bonds or allays his anxieties through the cosy comfort of the insurance company. The last stage in the rake's progress comes when he joins the Conservative party!

But all these securities can be struck from under him at one fell blow. We have seen in recent years how the

blast of one stick of gelignite can bring to dust and ashes the industrial concern to which he has given thirty years of diligent service. It would seem that God allows us our little temporary hide-outs, in which we seem to have a relative security, because at the last we shall discover that there is only one final security, one harbour from which the storms of life cannot drive out the frail barque of our spirit; and that is the harbour of God's love, to be possessed by him and to know that in his loving providence all is well. The Psalmist knew this when he asserted, "Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." Jesus, beginning his ministry in the quarantine of the mountain where he trusted himself to the Spirit and relied on the help of the angels, was able on the Cross to fulfil his last act of faith, when he whispered in his pain, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." Safe home at last.

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