

*THE PURPLE HEADED
MOUNTAIN*

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AUTHORIZED REISSUE



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The Temptation

Lent is the Church's re-enactment of Christ's forty days in the wilderness; an episode of inexhaustible depth and subtlety. It is no wonder that sermons and addresses on the Temptation are so diverse, each emphasizing a particular aspect of it. But I think it is a pity that so often there is a suggestion of undue passivity on our Lord's part. We are given the impression that Jesus found himself in the wilderness for no apparent reason, that he fasted for no particular purpose, when the devil, cleverly lying in ambush, swooped down to tempt him. Then it is implied that, in spite of this unfortunate situation, in spite of weakness and hunger, Jesus just managed to resist. It is the fight against heavy odds, the backs to the wall stand so loved by English military historians, and it contains an element of truth. But there is another side.

“Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness, to be tempted of the devil” (Luke 4.1). That plain statement—and there appear to be no special subtleties in translation—suggests that the boot might have been on the other foot. If Jesus is God and the Spirit is God it means that Jesus made a free, clear-cut decision to go into the wilderness for a very definite purpose. Victory over demonic powers goeth not out but by prayer, and, as useful support to prayer, fasting. So Christ fasted, again for a very definite reason: forty days of prayer, aided by a fast, was a carefully planned

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preparation for war, it was a systematic ascetical campaign, a well constructed Rule, not to make our Lord weak but to make him strong. Then Satan “came to him;” he had to, he had been sought out and caught in a well laid trap. Christ declared war and held the initiative all the time, which in no way diminishes the reality and bitterness of the struggle. Jesus Christ came to save the world; this initial conquest was part of the plan, it was no fortuitous occurrence but a major battle in a cosmic campaign.

If we may look at it in this way, the Temptation story throws light upon some of the practical pastoral questions we have been considering. Let us look, not at an Apollinarian symbol floating about in a vacuum, but at the Son of God in a particular place. The wilderness is not an abstract negation but a positive part of creation. Perhaps it was the ideal terrain for this battle or perhaps it was chosen as the infertile symbol of sin now to be defeated: “the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain,” but “the wilderness shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose.”

Most people prefer Switzerland to the Sahara, the Cotswolds to the Fens; the former are more inspiring, more awesome, more plainly a manifestation of the mind of God as we prefer to imagine it. But in spite of the Pauline theory just quoted, I do not think the desert is desert, entirely because of sin, or because God got bored and allowed the rivers to dry up: it is there for a purpose. The barren wastes are necessary when our spiritual energy needs conserving without distraction. Hugh of St Victor might have seen rivers, valleys and forests as symbols of spiritual consolation, as edifying,

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even as glorious liturgy, and the wilderness, or the farming of the Fens, as the necessary obedience of plodding spiritual stamina, of the humdrum daily discipline. William of St Thierry might be eager to point out that, compared with the lakes and wooded hills, the flat dreary fen was a good deal more productive. It is wonderful to worship in York Minster, but if we cannot find God and fight Satan in a tin shed we are still in the spiritual kindergarten.

The wilderness has become a symbol for a quiet place of prayer or retreat; the church in a city backwater, the remote country church or retreat house. But the emphasis is still in danger of being one-sided unless we use both interpretations of our Lord's Temptation. Retreat and prayer are too often thought of as "being quiet with God," as a kind of holy rest cure, as something calm, gentle and consoling. That attitude is not wrong, but it is only half the story. To enter a quiet place, to go into retreat, is also to seek out Satan—on our own initiative—and attack. To kneel down in prayer is also to stand up and fight, for although we must resist temptation through the busy day, it is in the wilderness that the real battle is won or lost. One cannot "lead a good life" without prayers, sacraments and Rule any more than battles can be won without training, arms and strategy.

Some people regard the Religious Orders, especially contemplative Orders, as "withdrawn from the world" selfishly and irresponsibly. On the contrary they form the real front line of the battle for world redemption, for they are imitating the Lord's Lenten activity in the wilderness: which was neither selfish nor irresponsible. The devil and his

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demons are the ultimate source of all sin and misery, and by God's grace we may occasionally deliver a telling blow or two against them, knowing all too well that we are bound to be hit back sooner or later. Only in the contemplative cloister is the devil perpetually groggy and it is strengthening to realize that the Church is one, the battle is one. When our personal sector looks a little shaky we know that further along the line the demonic armies are in flight. To be envious of the contemplative and mystic, to be discouraged by our comparison with the saints, is as silly as if a platoon in retreat was annoyed because the rest of the regiment was conquering.

Let us, however, consider one part of our own fight which is victorious. The confessional is the most deserted place in the world, a wilderness more remote than the Sahara. We enter it through penitence, the purposeful driving force, and, being Anglicans, we go there on our own initiative, not to pick fine legal points but to make a full and generous self-oblation at the foot of the victorious Cross. But fully to surrender to Jesus Christ is total onslaught upon the devil; meekly to yield to Christ is to charge, and here if nowhere else we have Satan just exactly where we want him: cornered, battered and cringing. This is one round we must win because Christ has won it for us, in the wilderness; our weapon is Christ, our arms are Christ, our power is Christ. However wounded when we enter, here we must win. In the confessional we deliver the knock-out blow, and I am sufficiently anti-Apollinarian to believe that our Blessed Lord will not only absolve but applaud.

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The devil is real, and I think we usually make one of two mistakes about him. Either we deny his existence or we give him more dignity than he deserves. The former error is fatal, and we should realize that in the cosmic, Biblical sense, he is no myth or fiction but an historical character, the fallen archangel. To deny the existence of angels, archangels and the host of heaven is to deny a large part of the doctrine of creation; it is to deny St Thomas' hierarchy of being from inanimate matter to God, for to omit the realm of pure spirit is to take a very narrow view of creation. It is like the tourist who spends a fortnight in Park Lane and thinks that he has seen England. If there are angels, upon which the Church insists, and if there is evil, which there too obviously is, then there must be demons. The characteristic work of demons is disorder, in body, mind and spirit, in civilization and society; the characteristic of hell is chaos, the opposite of creation: a land without order as the book of Job describes it. All this conflict is what St Augustine calls concupiscence, and whatever our increased knowledge of how its fruits develop, in mental disease and so on, we cannot explain why it occurs without reference to the fallen Archangel.

The other mistake is less serious but it is worth recognizing. In the profound theology of G.K. Chesterton, the devil fell through taking himself too seriously, since there is nothing so ridiculous as a creature trying to be God. The devil is dangerous but he is also grotesque. While properly estimating the fury of the battle, we must subject Satan to the scorn and ridicule he deserves, and we must constantly employ the weapons he fears: prayer and fasting; humility,

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penitence and truth; confession, grace, spiritual discipline;
Rule which is order.

In the wilderness Christ refused to turn stones into bread, on the Cross he refused wine, at Cana he miraculously created 120 gallons of it. Jesus never did things in moderation, he always did them generously and perfectly. These three episodes together throw a good deal of light on ascetical theory. Apart from more subtle reasons, the spiritual struggle in the wilderness demanded a continuation of the fast which supported prayer. Our Saviour had to make the final oblation of himself on the Cross with perfect obedience of mind and will, drugs would have interfered with it. He refused nothing at Cana, not I think because he was relaxing, because there was no great job on hand, but because this too was all part of a truly human ascetical plan. As I have said before, truly to keep, to observe, the Church's joyous festivals is as much a part of total Christian life as observing its penitential fasts. First things must come first, there must be order, but all the time, stones, bread, water, drugs, wine, remain very good parts of a very good creation.

I am aware that the story of the Cana marriage has given the scholars all sorts of headaches, many doubt its authenticity, and I am in no position to argue with them. But do we miss the point that it was *good* wine, much too good for those who were "well drunken," and that Jesus was not defying his principles by making blatant signs of his Godhead but that he was human enough to give an embarrassed host an acceptable present? I further suspect that there are some who object to the story because "they are quite sure that God would never do a thing like that."