

Jesus in the Wilderness: the Third Temptation

On the first three Fridays in Lent we are looking in turn at the three temptations Jesus experienced in the wilderness and reflecting on how they might relate to issues of peace and reconciliation. We have again just heard St Matthew's account (Matthew 4.1-11).

This week we consider the final temptation:

The devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him 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." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

There is that famous saying of Lord Acton: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men." That is perhaps a rather sweeping exaggeration, and yet it does contain a grain of truth. We only have to look back at history and, more pertinently, to our world today to see clear examples of that. Those who wield power tend to want to hold on to it, and may well resort to anything to achieve that. That is a temptation to which many a leader can all too easily succumb.

In the case of our Lord's temptation absolute power is associated with worship of the devil, of Satan. And the pursuit of power can indeed be seen as a form of idolatry when it becomes an end in itself. The focus is above all on self not on the needs, wishes and rights of others. The dictator is arguably the ultimate form of self worship.

Of course in the time of our Lord's earthly life the Jewish people lived under the power of the Roman authorities. The Roman Emperor was indeed treated as a god, a god to be worshipped. Yet Jesus reminds us that there is only one God to be worshipped. God, the ultimate source of power and authority, should be our true focus, the only object of our worship. Earthly power is subordinate to the power of God.

So how does this relate to peace and reconciliation? I would suggest that we need to affirm above all that God's will is for peace and justice. The whole purpose of his Son's incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection was to enable reconciliation between God and humanity, and by extension between human beings. Earthly power exercised purely for self-interest, for a personal agenda, is contrary to that. The Christian response is to witness to the higher authority of God, who is absolute goodness, absolute justice, absolute love.

That is the witness to which the Church as a whole and to which we as individual Christians are called. A tall order, you may well say. And yet the command is quite clear: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."

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