

Friday (Thomas a Kempis)

Christ: I do not cease to speak to all today; but many are hardened, and deaf to my voice. Many listen more willingly to the world than to God, and would rather follow the desires of the body than the good pleasure of God. The world promises passing pleasures of little worth, and is served with greater eagerness. I promise eternal and rich rewards, yet people's hearts are indifferent to them. Shame on you that those of the world are more ready for damnation than you are for salvation; for they are more wholehearted in vanity than you in Truth. Write my words on your heart and meditate on them earnestly.

Scripture (Luke 4:5-8)

Then, leading Jesus to a height the devil showed him in a moment all the kingdoms of the world, and said to him. 'I will give you all this power and their splendour, for it has been handed over to me to give it to anyone I choose. Do homage to me, then, and it shall all be yours.' But Jesus answered him 'Scripture says: You must worship the Lord your God, him alone must you serve.'

Take and Receive

Take, Lord, and receive
all my freedom,
my memory,
my understanding,
my entire will
- all that I have and call my own.
You have given it all to me.
To you, Lord, I return it.
Everything is yours:
I surrender it all to be guided by your will.
Your grace and your love
are riches enough for me.
Give me these, Lord Jesus,
and I ask for nothing more.

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1st Week of Lent

Very reasonable temptations

For what it's worth, I am probably counted as reasonably well qualified and successful. As a rule, I am most reluctant to detract from anything which reflects well on me, but I know that not much of this is due to me. I've worked hard, tried my best, put my best foot forward and all of that, but so much is due to other factors, such as my parents, where I was born, the genes I was born with ...and ultimately, to God. (A shorter version of this in the form of a recipe to bake a cake: first of all, invent the universe.).

In this context, it is easy to see the wisdom of Moses God's people, who are about to enter the Promised Land, urging them to guard against forgetting how much is due to God, (Dt. 26:4-10). When the harvest is in, i.e. when they have worked hard, they are to offer the first fruits to God, with a prayer which reminds them that all they have is due to God. To forget this, would be the first step onto a gentle but slippery slope to thinking they could 'go it alone', or at least reduce God to an 'added extra' by offering the fruits after they have ensured their own security and pleasure.

It is this slope that Jesus is tempted onto three times in the desert, (Luke 4:1-13). After his Baptism, Jesus would be aware of the power and influence he could have, especially with the understanding of what the Messiah would be like that he had been steeped in for thirty years and in the febrile atmosphere stirred up by John the Baptist. Why, then, would the Spirit lead Jesus into the desert for 40 days? What happened to 'carpe diem'? At the end of this period of fasting, Jesus 'was hungry': he would be weak, and therefore vulnerable (and a long way from the market). What is wrong with making food? Surely, God wouldn't want him to die, and maybe God is testing him to see if he has enough faith to use his powers? The temptation isn't to do anything evil, per se, but if Jesus turned a stone into bread, he would be relying on his own powers rather than putting his complete trust in God.

The second temptation would put Jesus in control as a ruler. Well – why not? Wasn't the role of the Messiah to establish God's Kingdom on earth, i.e. to rule? To have this power could be a good thing –Jesus would use it to bring about big changes, all for the better. Subtle, but false: he would use the power to simply replace one human system with another, (Jerusalem would become the new Rome), not God's.

The third temptation is perfectly reasonable. It's not a bad thing to want to save your own life, (especially when you have an important role to fulfil), but the point is that Jesus is being tempted to check that God will save him, the 'it's all very well, but how do you know?' thought. His response is to put complete trust in God, even with his life. Jesus struggled with these temptations, (there must surely have been a lot of prayer, doubt and time between temptation and response), and saw that, though they were reasonable and even sensible, they would move God out of the centre and put his own (human) vision in his place.

The same temptations, (to move God from the centre) face us. A powerful prayer for Lent would be to start the day with St Ignatius' prayer 'Take and Receive', and to note any resistance, any tendency to say 'except..', or 'but only if..', or 'when you have shown me it will work out well for me'. I suspect that, without asking for the grace to make this prayer sincerely, it will not be long before I am saying 'yes' to the temptations which put me in the centre. Martin Bennett

Monday (Bernard of Clairvaux)

He who gave himself to us when we did not deserve it certainly deserves a great deal from us. What glory is it to have what you do not know you have? And to know what you have, but not to know that it does not originate with you is to have glory, but not before God. Yet it is difficult for anyone, having received from God the power to will freely, to give up our will wholly to God and not rather will things for ourselves. We are tempted to treat what we have been given as our own and clutch it to ourselves. The faithful, though, know how utterly they stand in need of Jesus and him crucified. They are ashamed not to respond to such love and deserving with the little they have.

Scripture (Deuteronomy 26:7-11)

“The Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, our toil and our oppression; and God brought us out of Egypt with mighty hand and outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. He brought us here and has given us this country, a country flowing with milk and honey. Hence, I now bring you the first fruits of the soil that you, Lord have given me.” You will then lay them before the Lord your God, and prostrate yourself in the presence of the Lord your God.

Tuesday (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

The disciple who would follow Jesus but first wanted to bid farewell to those at home (Luke 9:61) thinks that following Christ means he must make the offer on his own initiative, as if it were a career he had mapped out for himself. Although he is ready enough to throw in his lot with Jesus, he succeeds in putting up a barrier between himself and the Master. The disciple places himself at the Master’s disposal, but at the same time retains the right to dictate his own terms. By making his offer on his own terms, he alters the whole position, for discipleship can tolerate no conditions which might come between Jesus and our obedience to him.

Scripture (James 4:5-8,10)

Do you not see that love for the world is hatred for God? Can you not see the point of the saying in scripture ‘The longing of the spirit he sent to dwell in us is a jealous longing?’ But he has given us an even greater grace, as scripture says : God opposes the proud but accords his favour to the humble. Give in to God, then. The nearer you go to God, the nearer he will come to you. Clean your hands, you sinners, and clear your minds, you waverers. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up.

Wednesday (Julian of Norwich)

This is our Lord’s will: that our prayer and our trust should be equally generous. For if our trust is not as generous as our prayer we cannot worship God to the full, and we hinder and harm ourselves. Sometimes it seems we have been praying a long time and still do not have what we ask. I am sure that what our Lord means is that we should see what he does, and pray that it should be done. One is not enough without the other. It is our Lord’s will that, whatever he plans to do, we should pray for it, either in particular or in general. The joy and delight it gives him, and the thanks and the glory we shall be given because of it, pass all understanding.

Scripture (Romans 12:1-2)

I urge you, brothers and sisters, remembering the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, dedicated and acceptable to God; that is the kind of worship for you, as sensible people. Do not model your behaviour on the present world, but let the renewing of your minds transform you, so that you may discern for yourselves what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and mature.

Thursday (Thomas Merton)

I am thinking of the disease which is spiritual pride that gets into the hearts of the saints and eats their sanctity away before it is mature. As soon as they have done something they know to be good in the eyes of God, they tend to take its reality to themselves and to make it their own. They tend to destroy their virtues by claiming them for themselves and clothing their own private illusion of themselves with values that belong to God. Who can do good things without seeking to taste in them some sweet distinction from the common run of sinners in this world? When a proud man thinks he is humble his case is hopeless.

Scripture (Psalm 119:1-5,10-12)

How blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the Law of the Lord! Blessed are those who observe his instructions, who seek him with all their hearts, and doing no evil, who walk in his ways. You lay down your precepts to be carefully kept. May my ways be steady in doing your will. With all my heart I seek you, do not let me stray from your commandments. In my heart I treasure your promises, to avoid sinning against you. Blessed are you, Lord, teach me your will.