

THE SPIRIT OF LENT

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Lent comes round each year, just as Advent, Christmas, Easter and Pentecost do. In its repetitive regularity, the liturgical calendar is made up of a series of rituals. Rituals can, of course, become empty and formulaic; but we cannot do without them. Even our everyday, secular lives are marked by rituals: we come of age; we get engaged; we eat birthday cake. Politics, too, has its rituals, especially at election time. And though some of these rituals are questionable, they remind us that we are citizens of a democratic state and not of a colonial power or an autocratic monarchy. Likewise church rituals remind us of our obligations as people who have been called to take on a Christian identity—called to be like Christ, sons and daughters of God and brothers and sisters of one another, in actions as well as in the words that we have learnt.

In the rituals associated with Lent we recall our baptism, and we seek forgiveness for sin. Lent is a time when we deepen our following of Jesus. We recall that Christ, after his baptism by John in the Jordan, spent forty days in the desert, and was subject to temptation.

The Symbolic Meaning of Baptism

The first and most decisive moment in Jesus' adult life, according to all four Gospels, was his baptism. The uniqueness of this moment can only be understood by comparing Jesus with the other recipients of the same baptism. All the other recipients acknowledged only their own individual sins. For them—and for John the Baptist himself—baptism was a matter of individual, private righteousness according to the strictures of Jewish social morality.

The difference with Jesus was that he took possession of others' sins, the sins of the whole of humanity, even though he had not committed any of them. His baptism, therefore, was vicarious, undergone on behalf of others. For Jesus, who was without sin, being baptized was an

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The Baptism of Christ, by Giovanni Bellini

act of generosity. He was not self-righteous, priding himself on his personal virtues and despising those who sinned. He made common cause with the virtuous and with sinners alike, standing beside them in solidarity and communion. Human sinfulness was a burden divinely imposed upon Jesus, and a responsibility entrusted to him because of his birth as a human being, as a creature. This birth as the Son of God meant for him solidarity with the human family, and with every created being. At his baptism, Jesus began publicly to fulfil his responsibility.

If Jesus' baptism meant to him such a deepened sense of belonging to the human family, baptism must mean rebirth and belonging for Christians too, in imitation of Christ. The ritual period of Lent is a time of preparation to celebrate Jesus' Easter mystery. But Jesus' own entry into the Easter mystery had begun with his baptism, and, with St Paul, the Church celebrates Easter as the meaning and goal of our own baptism also.

Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6: 4)

The symbolic, ritual act of baptism is that of washing someone with water. It signifies the Christian community's acceptance of a new arrival, and the individual's identification with a community wider than the family, society and nation to which they also belong. The Church

accepts the newcomer with a loving forgiveness both of their own personal sins and of original sin. This is the spiritual bond and communion that baptism signifies.

Christian Holiness as Forgiveness and Forgiveness

Baptism, then, involves the authority to forgive sins, which Jesus claimed and exercised; he commands us to forgive sins likewise. Baptism therefore implies human holiness, derived from the forgiveness of sins. The Church's own holiness also comes from the forgiveness of sins, and this holiness increases the more that sins are forgiven. Where sins abound, holiness can also abound. It is by forgiving the sins of its members, and non-members, that the Church remains true to the name and the significance of its Christian baptism. In this forgiveness it manifests and bears witness to the holiness and transcendence of God. God's own holiness is related to His forgiving love and His understanding of the weakness and fallibility that go along with human freedom. But forgiveness is not an exclusive power or prerogative of God: human beings are the spiritual sons and daughters of God, and God shares His spiritual authority to forgive sins with them. This was how and why Jesus could assume the authority to forgive sins and make it the foundation of a renewed or redeemed humanity, which we call the Church, the people of God and the body of Christ.

Forgiveness abolishes the social inequality between the superiority of saints and the inferiority of sinners: a saint is, after all, a sinner who has been forgiven. Forgiveness is accomplished when someone innocent takes on the moral evil, the blame and the guilt of others' sins, while excusing and exculpating the real offenders. It is an act of solidarity and an imitation of God which itself confers the authority to forgive. Through unilateral trust and the desire for reconciliation, the person who forgives accepts the punitive consequences of another's offence. The authority to forgive is thus bought at a price: it cost Jesus his death on the cross.

Human societies will persecute those who identify with the transgressors of their religious and social laws, and will challenge the authority that this confers to forgive. To forgive sins is to be made a scapegoat, a sacrifice. This is how Jesus came to be seen as, in the words of the *Agnus Dei*, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. And in giving the authority to forgive sins to his Church, Jesus

called the Church to become like a Lamb of God, forgiving the sins of the world through its own sufferings.

The Temptation of Jesus

We are sometimes tempted to ask for forgiveness without at the same time forgiving others, because we are not prepared to pay the price that forgiving entails. The Gospels tell us that even Jesus was tempted in the same way as we are. The temptations that Jesus faced, as they are narrated in Luke's Gospel, involved an attack on his baptismal identity, on his total belonging to the human household and family of God. They concerned the meaning of becoming and being a child of God, and choosing solidarity with others rather than power and superiority over them.

Jesus' first temptation focused on his bodily need for food after forty days of fasting. It reminds us of the serpent in Genesis 3, as well as of the people's complaints of hunger and thirst as they crossed the desert in Exodus. Jesus is tempted to convert stones into bread to satisfy his hunger. This temptation urges him to use the power to perform miracles to gratify his own need, when that power was given him by God to feed the whole hungry world. Jesus as Son of God represents the spiritual hunger for a life according to God's will rather than according to the instinctive needs of the body.

Jesus responds to the temptation by using Scripture: he answers, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone."' (Luke 4:4) The tempter then takes a scriptural cue from Jesus' own answer, prompting him to test the word of God by proving that he is God's Son. If Jesus is really the Son of God, surely God will save him if he throws himself from the pinnacle of the Temple. The tempter's words anticipate the mockery of the Jewish priests and the Roman soldiers who stood under the cross (Luke 23:35–37). And through these words the evangelists also implicitly acknowledge the scandal that his death on the cross constitutes when we accept that Jesus is Christ, the Son of God. In his response to this second temptation, Jesus refuses to question or to test God. He is sure that God will honour and glorify him as His Son.

The third temptation of Jesus goes beyond the first and the second. It is no longer about Jesus' being or becoming the son of God: the tempter urges him to become the subject and representative of Satan himself, by taking on the role of the earthly Davidic messiah. To do so would be to grasp at political power on behalf of the nation of Israel,



Temptation on the Mount, by Duccio di Buoninsegna

and to make idols out of individualism, nationalism and political authority. But Jesus refuses the role of a monarch and the idolatry of power; he stands by the word of God, identifying himself as one who worships God according to the Law of Moses in the same way as any other member of God's people.

The Link between Baptism, the Temptations and the Cross

'When the devil had finished every test', Luke then says, 'he departed from him until an opportune time' (4:13). This implies that the tempter would return to test and assail Jesus again later, but the evangelist leaves to us to infer the exact time and duration of that new temptation. In the synoptic Gospels it can be located in the admiration of the crowd and even of Jesus' disciples, who are eager for Israel's

messianic restoration. It is thus Jesus' followers who become his tempters. But Jesus is shown as resisting and rejecting their deeply held nationalistic and monarchic ambitions for him. The result is that his followers start to abandon and betray him out of disappointment. They accuse him before the authorities and demand his death for frustrating their nationalist desires and aspirations (Luke 23:1–5).

Because Jesus rejected earthly notions of messianic kingship, his own understanding of his messiahship was likewise rejected. Ironically, he was denounced as claiming to be the messianic king of the Jews: everything that his followers had wanted him to be they adduced as evidence against him (Luke 23:2). Individuals who fail to satisfy society's expectations in this way are liable to be met with anger and false accusations. Such violence is built into the structure of every human society.

Jesus was realistic in anticipating the consequences of his rejection of the popular messianic desire. He appeared to be fully conscious of his



choice and of what people's reactions to it would be, though as the consequences were about to unfold he was shaken and assailed by doubt. He even desired to avoid them altogether, if it were possible, praying, 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done' (Luke 22:42). For a moment Jesus hesitates between God's will and his own. But when he discerns that God does will him to drink of the cup of his sufferings, he forswears any effort to forestall his shameful death, and will not allow anyone to resist his arrest with violence. Jesus submits, not to the force of social law, but to the more binding will of God.

In obedience to the discerned will of God, Jesus chooses to submit, even to death on the cross. This is the symbolic meaning of the baptism he

had received in water. He took on and symbolically washed away the sins of his people as though they were his own. But this washing in water demanded to be ratified by washing in Jesus' life-blood as he delivered himself to be put to death for the sins of his nation. In imperial Roman eyes, Israel's sin consisted in seeking to make itself a kingdom, politically, in this world. But the kind of kingdom that Jesus envisioned and preached was different both from that of Jewish messianic hopes and that of Roman imperial concern. It was one in which God alone would be ruler, and where all humans would be equal citizens and brothers and sisters of one another. They would not be divided into factions, friends versus enemies, and they would oppose injustice and inequality non-violently rather than by retaliation. Jesus taught love, forgiveness and non-violence even towards those who hated him.

Forgiveness and Grace

Luke's Gospel gives evidence of this teaching when Jesus prays from the cross for his persecutors' forgiveness (22:34). And in John's account there are also two important moments where Jesus teaches love and forgiveness: one before and one after his death on the cross. At the Last Supper Jesus, the teacher and master, lovingly washes the feet of his disciples. In becoming their servant, Jesus showed how the first and the last become equals in the act of mutual forgiveness given in love and received in repentance. And after the crucifixion, Jesus breathes on his disciples, passing on to them his spirit and authority to forgive sins (John 20:22–23).

A third such scene occurs in this Gospel when Jesus, suffering on the cross, brings together his mother Mary and the apostle John to be mother and son to one another (19:26–27). Here the evangelist echoes the scriptural moment when Eve gives birth to Seth, in place of Abel, murdered by his brother Cain. This is Mary's baptism in the blood of her son Jesus, and she gives symbolic, spiritual birth to John and to the whole Church which believes in Jesus. Her symbolic baptism purifies her faith in the messianic son she had consented to bear, and it represents the purification of every Christian's faith by forgiving and being forgiven. Whoever accepts Jesus as the Christ has also lovingly to forgive their foes as Jesus himself did. This is how the Christian can authentically become a child of God in his or her own turn. Mary is



Mary and John at the Foot of the Cross, by
Hieronymus Bosch

the symbol and spiritual model for every genuine Christian who gives birth to other Christian believers through his or her own life of forgiving love.

In John's Gospel the symbolic significance of Jesus' baptism is fulfilled when Jesus' body is pierced and blood and water flow out. The water symbolizes the baptism that Jesus had received in the river Jordan, and the blood symbolizes the bloody death to which Jesus had already consented when he was baptized. The Gospel of John begins with the baptism of Jesus, and ends with the baptism of those who believe in Jesus. The giver of the baptism of water had to die and to live again in the one he baptized; likewise every recipient of baptism must await the same

lot—to die and to rise again in those whom they, in baptism, have forgiven.

The Significance of Lent for Us

During Lent, as baptized Christians we contemplate with Christ baptized on the cross. Lent is not just a ritual, a passing liturgical season; it represents the whole of our life of waiting, in expectation and hope, for bodily death and spiritual resurrection in the forgiveness of our sins. Lent symbolizes the whole of our baptized life as a struggle with temptation. And whoever the tempters may be, they are also instruments of God to test whether we are true and faithful to our baptismal commitment, our status as God's own children. Our

commitment is to imitate God and Christ in suffering love, to be ready to become victims rather than victimisers.

The temptations of Jesus typify many of our own human temptations. We are tempted to use the gifts that God has given us to gratify our instinctive needs, urges or desires, to achieve power and superiority over others. We are tempted to test God, to measure God by our own criteria and according to our own understanding, thereby bringing God down to our level. We are even tempted to play God ourselves, rather than behaving as sons and daughters of God.

Lent is a time of grace, when we may know ourselves and our true worth in the face of the temptations that we experience and our ability to stand up to them and overcome them. Our response to temptation shows us whether we are able to think, decide, judge and act as sons and daughters of God; it also reminds us that we are dependent on God and in need of His grace in order to resist temptation, and to be forgiven when we fail.

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