

## IF IT'S LENT, WHO BORROWED IT?

(Transcript of Sermon given by Dr Gregory Porilo at  
Unity Centre of South London on 13<sup>th</sup> March 2011)

There can be little doubt that the most profound religious experience of Jesus' early ministry -- the one that brought that ministry into existence and into public view -- was the baptism of Jesus by Saint John at the Jordan. As embarrassing as it was for the early Christian community to have to admit that the man they claimed to be the messiah had so publicly deferred to another popular religious reformer, we can be sure that the story was not fabricated. Most likely, Jesus later told his friends and followers about the baptism and how it figured in his subsequent mission, and the evangelists worked these stories into the narrative accounts of Jesus' baptism as they now appear in the Gospels. Were Jesus to tell his listeners that it was at the Jordan baptism that he first felt the power of God's call, it would be quite natural for Matthew to express it the way he did. Elizabeth Sands Turner in "Your Hope of Glory" writes that in going to John the Baptist for baptism, Jesus sought to identify himself with the good that John was doing in teaching the people to repent. In stating that he wished to fulfil all righteousness Jesus was seeking a contact with all that John represented. John was the last prophet of the old ways and there should be no separation between the two but rather a merging from the old to the new. Here Jesus clearly indicated that his teaching was not to debase the highest ideals of Judaism but was to expand their spiritual meanings.

Let us hear the story and what happens next, in a dramatic scripture reading from St Matthew 3:13 – 4:11.

**\*\* (4 people needed – narrator, John the Baptist, devil and Jesus) \*\***

Whenever there is a complete cleaning of the consciousness, represented by the water baptism, a spiritual illumination follows. As Jesus emerged from the river, the Holy Spirit descended on Him "like a dove" (symbol of gentleness, peace and new-creating life), and a voice came, bringing the announcement of his true identity: "This is my Son, whom I love; my favour rests upon him." (Matt 3:17).

Immediately after his baptism Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. (Mt 4:1). That seems to be quite a slap in the face, doesn't it? It's like saying "You are my son and I love you ..... now go into the desert and don't eat or drink anything for the next forty days." Would you do something like that to someone you love? On the face of it, it sounds like a very cruel, harsh and unjust manner in which to treat a loved person. But, there is a much deeper lesson to be learnt here.

The attainment of a higher consciousness is generally followed by a testing period to give us opportunity to prove that we have accepted and can use the illumination received. The individual consciousness must be disciplined and tested before it can become master of the thoughts. In the development of the Christ mind, an

entirely new and wider set of ideas and situations has to be met. The experiences of Jesus in the wilderness are to show us how to deal with the thoughts and desires of the senses, and to place them under proper discipline. It requires spiritual discernment and unselfish devotion to the highest Truth to meet and overcome the temptations of the personal consciousness.

According to Charles Fillmore in the *Metaphysical Bible Dictionary*, the Devil represents “the adverse consciousness that has been built up in ignorance and disregard of the divine law.” Jesus had taken on the limitations of the flesh or senses and was, therefore, tempted in all points, even as we are. He, too, had to meet the errors of the race thought. “After fasting for forty days and forty nights he was hungry.” (Mt 4:2).

Again, Charles Fillmore states that the forty days fast is an all-round denial of sense demands. In fasting, we in our thoughts live above the material needs. We are led up and our appetites and passions are for a season in such an eclipse that we think they will trouble us no more. But “afterwards he was hungry.” There is a return to sense consciousness.

Three great temptations were presented to Jesus, and he met them within his own consciousness, even as we must do. They are typical of the enticements that come to us when we realise that we have access to spiritual power. How are we going to use this power? To benefit the personal, or for the glory of God? Jesus is our great teacher, and his experience shows us how these temptations should be met.

The first temptation was: “If you are the son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” But he answered, “It is written You shall not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Mt 4:3-4)

Are we ever justified in using spiritual power to gain material wealth, even if it is to be used for what we consider a worthy purpose? The fact that God prospers those who trust and obey him is attested throughout the scriptures, but to centre our whole attention on substance in the form of materials supply defeats the purpose of a spiritual ministry. In addition, Charles Fillmore writes that the temptation to turn stones into bread illustrates the thought of ignorance that deceives people with the belief that they can satisfy the soul with materiality, without looking for the bread that comes from heaven, the Word of God. We must feed our soul with new truths daily, that we may grow in spiritual ways.

“Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the son of God”, he said, “throw yourself down; for it is written: “He will command his angels concerning you and they will lift you up in their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone,” Jesus answered him, “It is also written “Do not put the Lord your God to the test” (Mt 4:5-7)

This was a particularly subtle temptation, for there was a belief among the Jews that the Messiah was to appear in some spectacular manner. Had Jesus performed a feat of this sort, He would have called immediate attention to himself. His desire was to serve humankind. Would he not be entitled to secure a following by performing a miracle? Charles Fillmore states that this temptation means that no display of spiritual power for personal glory should be made. We cannot make a display of our spiritual power with safety. We should never speak the words of healing with the thought in mind to prove that Truth works or attempt to demonstrate any good for the purpose of convincing others that it can be done.

“Again the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. “All this I will give you”, he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.” Then Jesus said: “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.” (Mt 4:8-10)

We should never allow ourselves to be under the dominion of the personal consciousness. It promises power that it cannot give, and to yield to its alluring voice would pave the way for our own destruction.

The Metaphysical Bible Dictionary states that to worship the Devil is to worship personality; to live in personal consciousness and give it the substance of our life and thought. When the temptation arises in our consciousness to use our God-attained spiritual faculties and powers for the building of our personal ambitions, we should know that under divine law there is but one worthy of our worship and service, the Lord God. To serve God we must build up spiritually in mind, body and affairs.

Jesus met each of the three types of temptation by speaking the word of Truth. The Christ spirit will not permit God-power to be used for selfish ends. Jesus quoted from the book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament, thus showing his familiarity with these writings. It is helpful to memorise some of the favourite verses and promises that we find in the Bible. These are really affirmations of Truth and by pondering them our minds become imbued with spiritual ideas. In a time of temptation these ideas come readily to mind. By our holding steadfastly to them the claims of the mortal are refuted. The strength of the Almighty moves through us, and we are able to rise above negative conditions.

“Then the devil left him and angels came and attended him.” (Mt 4:11)

When we realise our unity with God and know that we achieve development only through singleness of mind and heart, the devil (personality) leaves us and we are content to worship God only. Then “angels”, which are our perceptive qualities quickened to the higher level of Spirit, minister to us. To gain self-understanding and self-dominion is the work of God that all of us must accomplish for ourselves.

When we surmount temptations, we experience release in mind and body, and feel the peace and comfort of Spirit. The overcoming of temptation is our own choosing. It is not the way of selfishness, even though it may seem to be a claiming of the good that is ours by divine right. It is the way of righteousness which we have chosen since we love the Most High.

A story is told about an Irishman who goes in to a Dublin pub, orders three pints of Guinness and sits in a corner of the room, taking a sip out of each glass in turn. When all three pint glasses are empty, he returns to the bar and orders three more. The bartender advises him: "You know, a pint goes flat after it's poured. It would taste better if you bought one at a time."

The Irishman replies: "Well, you see, I have two brothers – one in America, the other in Australia and I'm here in Dublin. When we all left home we promised to always drink this way, to remember the days when we drank together, so the other two pints are for my brothers."

The bartender admits that it's a very touching custom and leaves it at that. Over the next few weeks the Irishman becomes a regular at the pub, always drinking the same way: ordering three pints of Guinness at a time and drinking them in turn.

One day he comes in and orders only two pints. The other regulars notice this and fall silent. When he returns to the bar for the second round, the bartender says: "I don't want to intrude on your grief, but I wanted to offer my condolences and those of our regulars on the sad loss of one of your brothers."

The Irishman looks confused for a moment, before the light dawns and he laughs. "Oh, no", he says, "everyone's fine, but I've given up drinking alcohol for Lent!"

So, here we are now, on the first Sunday of this Lenten period. Have we ourselves given up anything yet? What is this Lent, where did it come from, and if it's Lent, who borrowed it? Every year in February or early March the Lenten season begins. It is, or can be, a marvellous experience in self-improvement. In a way, Lent is coincidental with spring, the season of new growth in nature. The trees and flowers are not content with the fruitage of last year. And if we are in the flow of the creative process, we experience divine discontent, in which we feel both the possibility and the need for growth.

Lent is traditionally a forty-day period of piety and discipline in remembrance of the forty-day fast of Jesus in the desert. But remember Jesus was not the only person who did a forty-day fast. Fasting was a very common practice, especially among the Jews, although very rarely for such a long period of time. Their fasts lasted normally one day, or maybe two days at most. The first notable mention of a forty-day fast was by ..... Moses, on Mount Sinai, and is recorded in the book of

Exodus, chapter 34 verse 28. "Moses was there with the Lord for forty days and forty nights; without eating bread or drinking water."

So, back to the question asked at the beginning - it's Lent, but who borrowed it? Answer – We did! It was originally a Jewish custom and Christianity therefore borrowed it from the Jews.

Fasting may be a sincere commitment to the spiritual life, but it is more often a superficial attempt to appease the conscience with a show of repentance. However, Lent can be a dynamic experience if it is approached with the will toward honest self-examination, self-discipline, and self-commitment.

Whether or not you follow the ecclesiastical observance of Lent, consider its metaphysical application. Turn from the simple act of giving up things to a more positive commitment to *take up* the practice of higher thinking.

For instance, Lent is often a discipline to give up certain foods. This is somewhat like dieting.

#### The Diet 23rd Psalm

Strict is my diet. I must not want.  
It maketh me to lie down at night hungry.  
It leads me to quietly drink water.  
It trieth my willpower.  
It leadeth me in the paths of alteration for my figure's sake.  
Yea, though I walk through the aisles of Sainsburys and Tescos, I will buy no sweets and chocolates, for they are fattening.  
The measuring tape and calorie counter confuse me.  
The cakes and the pies, they tempt me.  
You prepare a table before me, filled with salad, fruit and vegetables.  
You cover my lettuce with low-fat mayonnaise,  
My diet coke overflows.  
Surely calorie and weight charts will follow me all the days of my slimming plan,  
And I will dwell in the fear of scales forever.

Or, for the opposite:

My appetite is my shepherd, I always want.  
It maketh me to sit down and stuff myself.  
It leadeth me to my refrigerator repeatedly  
Sometimes during the night.  
It leadeth me in the path of McDonalds for a Big Mac.  
  
It destroyeth my shape.

Yea, though I knoweth I gaineth, I will not stop eating,  
For the food tasteth so good.  
The ice cream and the chocolate biscuits, they comfort me.  
When the table is spread before me, it exciteth me.  
For I knoweth that I sooneth shall indulge myself.  
As I filleth my plate continuously.  
My clothes runneth smaller.  
Surely the temptation of food shall follow me  
All the days of my life  
And I shall be "pleasingly fat" forever.

Unfortunately, if one holds onto a self-image of "too fat", this practice is self-defeating. Try a new approach. Don't give up anything. Instead take up a new image of yourself. "Think thin" and you will find yourself eating less and more wisely. And your weight will balance itself more effectively than when you tried so hard to give up things. This is just one example.

As some of us might be aware, especially if you have been reading "Keep a True Lent", in Unity we don't focus too much on physical fasting, but instead concentrate more on spiritual fasting, although there is absolutely nothing wrong with physical fasting too. So, if you must give up something, give up the tendency to consider yourself weak and undisciplined. The smoker often says, "I would like to quit, but I am just too weak." Get some altitude in your thinking. Emphasise *I can* instead of *I can't*; *I will* instead of *I wish I could*.

Emerson refers to prayer as *the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view*. It is a great idea. Form the habit of reaching for the highest point of view in all your dealings. It is a way to pray without ceasing. Take up this practice and you will worry less about what to give up.

If you have been letting things get you down, take up the idea that you are the master of your thought world. No matter what people do or say, no matter what may happen around or to you, take up the idea, "Why should I let these things determine how I am going to think or act?" Keep the spirit of joy, the attitude of gratitude, in good times and in bad.

Take up the practice of speaking the positive word, "Let something good be said!" Commit yourself to a diet of words that are positive and loving. Whether you are talking to or about people, events or ideas, let something good be said!

Throughout the church world during the season of Lent, people strive to become better Christians. Therefore we should not look upon it as a forbidding or a sad season of fasting and prayer but as a spiritual experience that means much to all of us if we enter into its observance in the right spirit.

Primarily the purpose of Lent is to prepare us mentally, physically and spiritually for a new awakening; to resurrect us out of old states of consciousness into a new realisation of life; and to permit us to reconsecrate and rededicate ourselves to the will and the work of Jesus Christ. Through our spiritual awakening, we shall find renewed life and health, a joyous freedom from burdens, and best of all, peace of mind.

Our preparation consists first of all of a careful, impersonal and honest appraisal of our thinking habits in order to see how they can be improved. In the early days, penitent Christians began Lent by acknowledging their sins and by entering up on a period of public penance. Today we know that we can find release from error and the effects of erroneous thinking in the past by ... bringing our mind and heart into unity with the Christ mind so that its divine ideas may control our thinking and guide it into constructive channels.

Every one of us has habits that need correcting, habits of thinking and feeling, eating, speaking and acting that should be given up, replaced by better ones.

When we set about giving up a bad habit for a good one we are not losing anything. We are gaining. We are not renouncing the good things of life. As a matter of fact, we never let go of anything unworthy of us without immediately making room in our mind and heart and life for something much better. In metaphysics we are daily practicing renunciation through our use of denials and affirmations. We deny that which we do not desire in our life and affirm or claim that which we do desire.

Let Lent be for us a time of self-discipline. If you have been eating too much, practice restraining your appetite ... If you have indulged in a bad temper ... restrain your impulse to "fly off the handle." If you have been prone to nag, to criticize or gossip, to moan and complain, to find fault with everything, endeavor to give up the habit and to improve your disposition.

Lent can be a spiritual experience, not by what we give up as much as by what we take up. More than just trying to lose weight, we will be working to shift the weight of our consciousness from the negative to the positive and creative. It can be a time of great believing leading to great overcoming and great living. It can be a wonderful season of spiritual growth. It's Lent, we have borrowed it, so let's make good use of it! Amen.

### Meditation:

Let us now remove the books from our laps. Let us relax and turn within. Close your eyes if you want. Let the chair support the whole weight of your body. Listen to the music.

Our Father, whose power resides within us, of whose consciousness we are a part, in whom we live and move and have our being, we know that you, our creator, have instilled in us the power and the wisdom

To create for ourselves the world in which we live.

To deliver ourselves from the evil of our own wrong thinking.

To lift ourselves from where we are to where we wish to be.

During this sacred time of Lent, we release all feelings of fear and resentment and hate.

We forgive others, as we would be forgiven.

We keep ourselves in attunement with your indwelling presence.

We thank you dear Father for the inner assurance that we are never alone.

Even in times of temptation we know that you are always with us and that we may turn to you for guidance and protection whenever we feel the need.

For you are the power and the wisdom and the love that will abide with us forever, and for this and all your blessings we are truly grateful.

And as we are about to bring this time of meditation to a close, let us say "Thank you Father" three times.

Thank you for listening and may God bless you. And shall we now sing the hymn on the sheet, "Forty Days and Forty Nights".