

THE HOUR OF TEMPTATION

By BERNARD COOKE

CHRISTIAN appraisal of the human experience of temptation must proceed from an educated understanding in faith of the temptation of Christ in the desert. Everything that Jesus said and did radically re-evaluated and re-orientated the fundamental actions and experiences of human life. And the Gospel accounts quite clearly point to the temptation of Jesus as one of the particularly significant events in his earthly life. Since the Gospel description of Christ's temptation is aimed at instructing the Christian community regarding the recurrent human situation of temptation, this passage provides an invaluable basis for our present study.

We are to note, first of all, that the temptation of Jesus is not described as an isolated event. In the Synoptic Gospels the narration of Christ's trial by Satan in the desert is inseparably linked with the description of Christ's baptism by John; these two events form two stages of one mystery rather than two distinct mysteries. (We find this same intertwining of the two scenes in the Baptismal liturgies of the earliest Christian centuries, where the renunciation of Satan immediately precedes the baptizing; and the tradition is maintained in our own baptismal ceremonial.) Not only is Christ's temptation linked to his baptism; it is linked with everything that follows in Christ's public life up to its termination in death and resurrection. St. Luke points to this in the final words of his description of the desert scene: 'Satan left him *for a time*'.¹

Actually, what is involved in Satan's temptation of Jesus is the suggestion that He abandon the *kind* of Messianic role that He was meant to play. Pointed to as a suffering Messiah, not just by the famous 'Servant Songs' of the book of Isaias, but by the whole developing course of the sacred history of the Old Testament, he is encouraged by the tempter to seek some other way of 'redeeming' mankind. This same temptation comes to him at later stages of

¹ Lk 4, 13.

his public life and in somewhat differing forms: from his family who encourage him to work startling wonders at the feast day,¹ from the Scribes and Pharisees who try to force his ministry into their preconceived notions about Israel's salvation,² from his Apostles who insist that he should not 'go down to Jerusalem to be put to death by sinners',³ finally from his own bodily nature which recoils in Gethsemane from the impending suffering and death.⁴ At the heart of the mystery of Christ's temptation is his free decision to remain faithful to that way of Messianic redemption planned for him by the infinite wisdom of his Father.

This means, then, that free decisiveness lay at the very heart of Christ's response to life, and that this response was given in the midst of continuing challenge. Christ had been given a task to accomplish; he was tempted to avoid the given task and to settle for some more comfortable substitute; he was tempted to prefer a judgment based on created 'wisdom' to the judgment of divine wisdom. Christ's human holiness found expression in the straightforward acceptance of the earthly existence that was given to him, in honest confrontation of the task that was his to do, in a decisive embracing of his Father's will. As presented to us in the Gospel pages, Christ's human sanctity is a matter of a completely mature facing of life in honesty and love.

In the dual scene of Baptism-Temptation there is an implicit parallel with Adam and Israel. Christ's choice is presented as the opposite of the false choice made by the first man and by the chosen people. Theological reflection on this aspect of the Gospel text leads us to the realization that Christ's response to Satan forms an integral part of the process of redemption. On Calvary Jesus overcame evil by his free choice to adhere to the Father's will; it was not by dying that Christ defeated evil, but by his obedient *acceptance* of death. This actual and willing undergoing of death was Christ's definitive rejection of the temptation that he find some other means of saving mankind; on the cross Jesus speaks his final answer to Satan. At that point, the basic course of human history is unalterably reversed; Christ's true choice sets the pattern of human response to creaturely existence in opposition to the false choice of Adam; this is one of the deepest aspects of Christ's redemptive action. However, this final stage in Christ's public ministry forms

¹ Jn 7, 1-4.

² Jn 7, 10 ff.; 11, 47-51 etc.

³ Mt 17, 21-23; Lk 9, 21 etc.

⁴ Lk 22, 42 etc.

part, even though a unique and 'recapitulating' part, of that ministry; and the earlier stages participate in the significance and effectiveness of the crowning redemptive mysteries. Thus the action of Christ in the desert, rejecting the suggestions of Satan, is not simply a promise of coming redemption. It forms part of that continuing choice of Christ which is the very heart of his redemptive activity.

As the final stage in this brief examination of the temptation of Jesus, we might consider the specific issues at stake in each of the three suggestions of the tempter. Again, this is done not merely to clarify the objective situation that existed during the conflict between Jesus and Satan, but to disengage those deeper lessons about human life which the event is meant to reveal to a Christian. In the form in which Satan speaks to Christ, the temptations are false methods he might employ to bring salvation to men; but they also point to the false sources of salvation that men seek in their lives.

In the first proposal of Satan, 'Change these stones into bread', there is question of sustaining life, and the temptation is fundamentally that of excessive absorption in material security. Too often men tend to equate 'life' with the existence and well-being of the body, with vegetative and sensitive living, forgetting that a person lives most properly in his thought, love, and freedom. To risk, or even deliberately sacrifice, one's bodily health or life in order to safeguard and develop one's truly personal level of life is a course of action that requires a vision and courage that are not too common. Without the issues being thus clearly drawn, men can subtly fear any possible threat to bodily prosperity and so allow themselves to become absorbed in providing for this level of their life. It is of this that Christ speaks in the Sermon on the Mount when he says: 'Seek first the kingdom of heaven, and all these things will be added unto you'.¹ And it is this which Christ has in mind when he answers Satan: 'Not by bread alone does man live, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'. God's word is life-giving in so far as it is the creative force that governs providentially the least details of our material life. But it is much more richly life-giving as it functions in revelation to nourish the personal depths of our human living. The first temptation in the desert is to lose one's perspective, to place the pursuit of material things in the position of primacy, to subordinate people to things.

¹ Mt 6, 33.

It would seem that the second temptation (in the order narrated by St. Matthew) reduces itself to the suggestion that one 'force God's hand'. Old Testament texts had said that God would guard his Messiah with a special protection; now Satan tells Christ that he should test God to see if he is faithful to his promises. However, it would be a superficial reading of the text to see nothing more in this temptation than an arbitrary 'testing' of God. Rather, what is involved is the human tendency to prefer our own way of accomplishing our good (and how often we look for the spectacular solution); and then, when our rejection of God's way has led to grave danger or disaster, we run to God, appealing to his promises to care for his own. After preferring our fallible judgments to divine wisdom transmitted to us in revelation, we then look to God to exercise extraordinary power in order to remedy our foolishness. This, as we will see in more detail, is the case of each person who without need places himself in occasions of sin.

Rebuffed by Christ's answers, that life comes not just from bread and that one should not put God's fidelity to the test, Satan finally offers the wealth and the power of the world to Christ. This, too, Christ rejects as a means of accomplishing the salvation of man, of bringing happiness to man. Again, the universality of the temptation to find an answer to life through the possession of wealth and power is rather apparent; though it may not be so apparent (and this the temptation of Christ clarified) that this is a subtle temptation to idolatry, since something other than God is being placed in the position of ultimate good.

Having briefly analyzed the temptation of Christ in the desert, which is meant to be a guide to our understanding of all human personal decision, we are in a position to study the Christian view on our common experience of temptation and the fundamental issues involved.

ACCEPTING CHRISTIAN VALUES

In our day by day consciousness of temptation we tend to think of such situations as being the acceptance or rejection of some temporal good that is incompatible with our ultimate good. While it is true that the appeal of such false 'goods' does enter into this moment of decision as an important factor, yet something much more basic is at stake. Actually the issue is whether or not we will honestly submit to judgment the created good in question, and to judgment

by the Christian values that we claim to espouse. At issue is the genuineness of our commitment to the Christian vision of life, to the wisdom of Christ that St. Paul describes as a stumbling-block to the Jews, and foolishness to the Greeks.¹

To put the matter another way, one can say that temptation puts our Baptism to the test, as the temptation of Christ put his baptism to the test. In undergoing Baptism the Christian professes his whole-hearted belief in the meaning and effectiveness of Christ's death and resurrection. He publicly professes that he accepts the values contained in Christ's mysteries, and he solemnly rejects the opposing values: 'Do you renounce Satan and all his works and pomps? I do renounce them'. All the experiences of life and all the realities that enter into those experiences are subject to judgment by these two opposing value systems. And in the moment of temptation the Christian faces the choice of judging the good of a certain course of action by applying the perspective of Christian faith. This he is pledged to do by his Baptism, and to make the sinful choice is to be unfaithful to his Christianity, to his membership in the Body of Christ. Thus the Sacramental sign of his reconciliation to God (the externals of the Sacrament of Penance) is an act of reconciliation with that Body of Christ.

As we view temptation from this point of view, we see that it is extended over a period of experience longer than just the short span that we ordinarily call 'the moment of temptation'. Actually, in all our personal living there is a constant challenge to our Christian values, to which challenge we are more or less deeply responding and so conditioning ourselves for those specific instances when these values may be more acutely brought into question.

MANIFESTATION OF LOVE

Again, the situation of temptation raises the questions: how truly operative is our Christian love of Christ, of the heavenly Father, of our fellow man? If we are being tempted to some false course of action, it is because that seems good to us in some way or other, seems to promise something that we see as desirable. And if such apparent goods can draw us away from God, if we can prefer some material thing or some temporal pleasure to the betterment of a fellow human person, it is a clear indication that genuine Christian love is not the governing force in our living.

¹ 1 Cor 1, 22-23.

Meeting temptation is not a question of suppressing the attractiveness of some or other created good. It is rather a question of not following after this misleading attraction because one is more deeply moved in love towards God. To stand in haughty superiority, untouched by the appeal of created things, may be Stoic virtue, but it is not Christian. The very heart of Christian triumph over life's temptations is Christian love, love of Christ and, with him, love of all mankind. This has important practical implications: in moments of particularly difficult decision, when one is perhaps profoundly affected by emotions of fear or desire, that which must be brought to bear on the situation is one's love of Christ. Such love is not something that can be brought into being at a moment's notice. It is the abiding and developing gift of oneself to Christ, a deep personal commitment of oneself to an intimate sharing of life's experience with Christ, a profound loyalty that recoils from denying those values for which Christ was willing to die. To the person who possesses such a love of Christ there comes a great freedom from the unreasonable attraction of things or even persons. But the price of this freedom is that the Christian allows himself to be drawn to Christ, that he places himself in those situations of 'discovery' of Christ (personal meditative prayer, reading of Scripture, the Mass) where the personal majesty and warmth of Christ can win his deep devotedness.

To some extent, every temptation that a person faces is a temptation to self-centredness, to a denial of love. Every sin is a capitulation to this centripetal tendency, and constitutes a lack of genuine affection for God, for one's fellow man, even for one's self. Just as love is the crown of every other virtue, so is the lack of love involved in every sinful act; and each situation of temptation is a choice to give or to deny love.

TEST OF MATURITY

Still a third way of viewing temptation in its more profound dimensions is to see it as a test of one's maturity, of one's free decisiveness. The adult is the person whose actions flow from self-aware and responsible choice; the person who works to achieve life-goals that fit his dignity as a person, no matter what the circumstances of his life may be. Such a person lives, at least for the most part, the kind of life that he truly wishes to live. He is not unduly affected by the approval or disapproval of his fellows,

his emotions do not propel him precipitously into courses of action that destroy the very things that mean most to him.

Moments of temptation are the situations that manifest most clearly the presence or the absence of such maturity. One of the things that is quite noticeable about Christ as he is depicted in the Gospels is the way in which he is completely in command of the moments of choice, of 'temptation', in his public life. Whether it is a question of confronting Satan in the desert, or the Scribes and Pharisees in the Temple precincts, or Pilate on Good Friday, Jesus is always master of himself and of the situation. Even in the midst of Gethsemane's agony, the response – and it certainly does not spring from an insensitive haughtiness that might be mistaken for maturity – is one of reasserting the choice that had guided his every action: 'Thy will, not mine, be done'.

So, too, the mature Christian is the one who has thought through the values that guide his life, is conscious of the objectives for which he strives, and has truly chosen to live according to these values and objectives. Consequently when a need for decision arises he is not stampeded into some action by fear or anger or desire. While he cannot in advance make all the pragmatic judgments that life will demand of him, he has acquired those elements – understandings, motivations, images, ideals – which can flow as principles into any given prudential judgment. To provide these elements is a large part of the purpose of religious education, personal prayer, and spiritual direction. Others can prepare a person for the choice, instruct him, encourage him (and obviously the grace of God will be there to sustain him); but no one can make the choice for him. There is a certain loneliness in the moment of temptation that is pointed to, it seems, by Christ's isolation in the desert. When choices arise, no one can really choose for us. As persons, we alone can commit ourselves to our destiny.

ACCEPTANCE OF LIFE

Perhaps, after reflecting upon the temptation of Christ in the desert, we can sum up all we have said so far in this way: what is at stake for the Christian in every situation or moral choice is a realistic acceptance of life. For each individual the practical demands that are set up by his personal gifts or deficiencies, by his professional or civic responsibilities, by his education, by the relationships he has to various people, by the graces he has been given, are

in some sense unique. They point in undeniable fashion to the unique vocation that each person has within the mystery of the Church. Like Christ in the desert, the Christian is faced with the need to accept that vocation realistically.

On the surface, this analysis of the moment of temptation may seem over-simplified, overly naturalized. Yet in actuality it requires a courageous and all too rare appraisal of self to see the concrete dictates of one's life-situation. Some men will not face the human limitations that are theirs, and in reaching for goals that are mirages they will neglect the goals that they are meant to attain. Others, more gifted but fearing the effort required to exploit the superior gifts that are theirs, or lacking the hope that is needed for achievement of greatness, deceive themselves into thinking that in settling for mediocrity they are being humble. It requires both deep love and mature honesty – virtues that go together and flow from grace – to evaluate objectively one's self and the situation in which one finds oneself at any point in life.

NEEDS IN TIME OF TEMPTATION

It seems quite clear, then, that if a Christian is to meet successfully the temptations of life, something more basic is needed than 'methods' (recitation of prayers, distraction of attention, etc.). These latter are helpful, only if they are grounded in and express deeper sources of Christian response.

From what has already been said, it is clear that successful encounter with the temptations of life requires on the part of the Christian a *firm decision* about the basic issues of life. Decision lies at the very core of Christ's human spirituality and the same must be true of any genuine Christian spirituality possessed by his followers. The decision to be Christian, first expressed in the Sacrament of Baptism and reiterated by each participation in the Eucharistic action of the Mass, should be a controlling force in all one's choices and actions.

This seems rather obvious; and it is. If one is going to choose aright in situations of temptation, one must truly wish to do so. Yet the fact remains that the development and cultivation of such a deep and operative decision is a continuously difficult task. Each failure that the Christian experiences in a moral choice serves to inform him that attraction to virtuous living is not the same as the decision to live virtuously, that one can wish to be a good Christian

without deciding to be such. Apparently solid resolutions, even those made during the yearly retreat (whose purpose is to lead us to sharper and deeper 'election' of Christian living), remain unfulfilled. And we come to realize through humbling experience how difficult it is to say 'yes' to God and truly mean it.

Since decision is always the result of love, it is clear how essential a true love of God is to successful encounter with temptation. If this love be deep and realistic enough, if one is profoundly attached to Christ in genuine personal devotedness, that which contradicts this love cannot have an appeal strong enough to induce a person to sin. From which it follows that one of the most essential steps to be taken in preparing for the moments of more difficult and more important choice is to develop an ever-growing intimacy with the three divine Persons. This love of God will inevitably translate itself into true Christian love of oneself and love of others; and these two loves will operate with great effectiveness in time of temptation, leading us to the choice that is compatible with them.

Decision and love are basic needs, then, in the situation of temptation. But man is a complex creature with imagination and emotion in addition to powers of intellectual understanding and love. Moreover, man tends to act according to patterns established by his social environment and even more importantly by his own previous activity. Hence the importance in the situation of temptation of what we call habits or virtues, patterns of response in thought and love, in sense experience and emotional reaction.

Ultimately, human reason and love can, in normal situations of temptation, control the influence of imagination and emotion on action; to deny this would be equivalent to denying any true human freedom. Yet the powers of sense cognition and response do have a certain autonomy; at times the emotional reaction to some sense perception (e.g. fear at the sudden sight of an attacking wild animal) can be so gripping and immediate that action follows with a minimum of intellectual reflection; at other times the emotional response can be so conditioned by repeated linking with some sensation (e.g., desire and anticipated pleasure at the sight of some favourite food) that there is little intellectual recognition of the situation as one of choice. Herein lies one of the deep problems of vice: the capitulation to the emotions' response in the presence of some false good has been so frequent that in a moment of temptation one scarcely gives any consideration to the non-sinful alternative; the sinner only dully adverts to the fact that he is in a position of making a choice.

Granting, then, this influence of behaviour patterns on our day by day choosing, it becomes abundantly clear how important it is that we develop a conditioning of our emotional impulses that will point to genuinely Christian choice. Assailed as he is by a continuous stream of propaganda and advertising that link emotional responses of pleasure, anger, or desire to a whole series of sense experiences – and this on the basis of a completely secularistic set of values – the Christian is in serious danger of succumbing to this imposition on his freedom without ever recognising it as an imposition. To counter this danger, and so to prepare himself for moments of temptation the Christian must develop a rich imaginative and emotional life that embraces the true goodness and beauty of the creation of God and the creations of man.

Obviously, the most basic need a human has in time of important personal decision is that of God's supernatural help, whether this be the abiding divine transformation of man through sanctifying grace and the infused virtues or the less permanent assistance we call actual grace. Through faith we know that a man cannot make any choice that is proportionate to his supernatural destiny unless God's grace is already working in him, moving him towards that destiny.

While this supernatural help is a gift and no action of man by himself can ever deserve this gift, sanctifying grace is a life that must be cultivated and nourished. Man must co-operate with God's action, must willingly place himself in those situations where this grace-life can develop. Since this life expresses itself most fundamentally in knowing and loving the three divine Persons, the Christian must consistently resort to prayer, must allow himself to encounter these Persons. His consciousness and affectivity transformed by faith and hope and charity are meant to be absorbed in God; for this to happen gradually, the Christian must see to it that his days contain some occasions of prayer when he can develop his understanding of and attraction to the Blessed Trinity.

Unique among the opportunities for growth of this life of grace are the actions of the Sacraments, when Christian life comes to its sharpest focus and richest expression. One would miss much of the importance of the Sacraments in Christian life, would have little understanding of the way in which Sacraments prepare the Christian for the moments of temptation, if he were to consider the Sacraments merely as times when a person receives grace. Catholic teaching has from the earliest centuries seen the Sacraments as *professions of faith*, as acts in which Christians accepted in mature

decisiveness their role in the mystery of the Church. Thus, at the very moment of expressing his Christian freedom and his sanctifying grace by a loving acceptance of Christ, the Christian has this grace and love deepened in him by God acting through the Sacrament. From what has been said earlier about the role of free and mature decision in temptation, one can see the key role that Sacramental life is meant to play in arming the Christian to triumph over temptation. Yet such effectiveness of the Sacraments can be expected only if Christians participate in them with understanding and generosity.

CONCLUSION

Before concluding we might ask: is temptation, then, an evil in the life of a Christian? Unquestionably, evil comes into the picture; for as any human, be he Christian or not, encounters a situation of moral choice he has certain forces within himself that draw him to evil. These work against freedom and truth and love. Consequently, there is always danger that the decision which emerges may be evil. On the other hand, the moment of temptation is the occasion when the Christian can assert his freedom, can voice his honest acceptance of Christ's values, can express his love of the heavenly Father. Without such occasions of choice, there would be much less opportunity for him to exercise his powers of self-assertion and self-commitment, to mature as a person.

It is from the characteristically Christian point of view that the positive role of temptation in the mystery of human life can best be seen. Christian life, especially in its Sacramental expressions, is a continuation of the actions of Christ; and so the positive significance of the temptation of Christ should find its place in Christian temptation. Christ's temptation really enters into the redemptive work of Christ; and even when we consider the climax of redemption on Calvary, it is essentially by his attitude of answering temptation that Christ saved mankind. In this light, we can see that temptation means for the Christian the opportunity to link his own acceptance of life with the redemptive acceptance of Christ. The meeting of temptation is for a Christian a sharing in the work of Christ. Fraught with danger, since man is frail, temptation still offers to the Christian a challenge to greatness, an opportunity for personal development in freedom, a share in Christ's priestly mission.