

## March 13, 2011 - First Sunday of Lent (A)

Readings for the First Sunday of Lent (Cycle A):

1. Genesis 2.7-9; 3.1-7

Psalm 51.3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 17 Response: "Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned."

2. Romans 5.12-19 (long form) or Romans 5.12, 17-19 (short form)

3. Matthew 4.1-11

### Reflections on the Sunday Gospel Reading by Bill Hunt

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This Sunday's gospel reading relates a challenge to Jesus' honor from the spirit world. We have to see the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness in the context of the two preceding verses in Matthew's Gospel:

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."  
(Matthew 3.16-17)

In the world of Matthew's narrative this scene takes place in full view and within earshot of the crowds, including Pharisees and Sadducees, who were flocking to John to be baptized. (Matthew 3.6-7) People of Jesus' time and Matthew's audience would have taken it for granted that the spirit world also witnessed this divine honoring of Jesus. (See Pilch 1995, 49.)

As Matthew presents the scene it was a antagonistic, confrontational culture of his time, such an honor claim would have to be challenged. And so it was - first by the devil as a representative of the spirit world, later by Jesus' own disciple Peter, and finally at Jesus' crucifixion by the same kind of people who came to John for baptism, the common people and the religious leaders.

The confrontation between Jesus and the devil takes place in "the desert." The Greek word *éremos* (from which the word "hermit" comes) is a demographic term, not a geographical one. It denotes a place where there are no people, where one is alone. It has nothing to do with sand dunes and cacti. It is contrasted to two other types of places: the public sphere where men interact openly with other men, and the private sphere of the home where men interact with women and children. Accordingly, as Matthew tells it, there were no witnesses to this encounter. Jesus goes one on one with the devil.

How then did Matthew find out about it? It might go back to a mystical experience that Jesus shared with his disciples. John Meier comments that Matthew envisions Jesus' being taken up

into an apocalyptic vision. (Meier 1980, 29) More likely, it is a story that illustrated what relatively early followers of Jesus thought it meant for him to be called the "Son of God." In any event it reached its present literary form a decade or more before Matthew incorporated it almost verbatim into his Gospel.

The forty days and forty nights of Jesus' fast seem to be less a reference to the forty years the People of Israel spent in the desert than an allusion to the fast of Moses on Mount Sinai (Horeb) (Exodus 34.28; Deuteronomy 9.9 & 18) or to the fast of Elijah on his journey to Horeb for a climactic encounter with God. (1 Kings 19.8) In Matthew's narrative it serves as a prelude to the Sermon on the Mount. Just as Israel was called the Son of God (Exodus 4.22-23; Hosea 11.1), Matthew portrays Jesus as embodying the People of Israel, undergoing the same temptations, but remaining utterly faithful to God's word.

The devil/tempter, who (as Matthew's readers presumed) had heard God's words of praise and honor, challenges Jesus to display his honor, to take advantage of his status as Son to get God to take care of his own needs. We have been told that after his fast Jesus was hungry. Taking into account Matthew's frequent use of the "theological passive" in his Gospel, the tempter's challenge could be reworded: "If you are the Son of God, command God to make these stones become loaves of bread." The client of a powerful patron could count on the patron to respond to his request for help. If not, he wasn't truly a client, and the honor he claimed was fictitious. The tempter is asking Jesus to demonstrate that he is God's Son by getting God to do what he (Jesus) wants.

Jesus replies with a quote from Deuteronomy 8.3 referring to the manna: "One does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God." Meier comments: "The mark of the Son is that he trustfully waits for God's help. He is nourished by total surrender to God's word, which creates and sustains humanity in all its needs." (Meier 1980, 30) Jesus trusts that God will feed him in good time if he is faithful to God's word.

Not to be outdone, the devil mounts his second attack and shows that he can quote scripture, too. He repeats "if you are the Son of God," and again challenges Jesus to prove his status by showing that he can command God's protection by throwing himself down from the Temple. Jesus again quotes from Deuteronomy 6.16 referring to the incident at Massah where the Israelites on their way from Sinai to the Promised Land tested God. (See also Psalm 95.) "[T]rue trust includes an obedience which does not try to force God's hand, as Israel did at Massah. Instead of revealing his filial power to perform miracles, Jesus reveals his filial authority to interpret Scripture correctly." (Meier 1980, 30)

Then the devil takes Jesus up to the top of a symbolic mountain from which they can see "all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence." The devil claims the divine prerogative of being able to hand over all these kingdoms and of being the object of worship, namely a god. This time he has gone too far. He attacks the most fundamental tenet of Israelite religion, belief that there is only one God.

For the third time Jesus responds by quoting Deuteronomy. "The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him [alone] shall you serve." (Deuteronomy 6.13) By adding "alone" to the quote 3

from Deuteronomy Matthew's Jesus echoes the Shema<sup>4</sup>, the most fundamental Israelite profession of faith: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart." (Deuteronomy 6.4-6) With this final quote, Jesus dismisses Satan.

The story of the temptation or challenge to Jesus' honor turns out to be a debate over the nature of true sonship. The true son is absolutely loyal to his father/patron. He is faithful to his father's commandments and trusts his father implicitly, every sign to the contrary notwithstanding. He does not try to force his father's hand but waits patiently for his father to vindicate his honor in due time. Jesus had that kind of relationship with God.

At the turning point of Matthew's Gospel the same words, "Begone Satan!" with which Jesus dismissed the devil are addressed to Peter when he tries to tempt Jesus. After Peter's confession of Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the living God . . . Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." In Matthew's narrative Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. Peter attempts to shame Jesus into deviating from God's will. This prompts a stinging rebuke from Jesus in return. (Matthew 16.13-23) Divine sonship means loyalty and trust in God even in the face of suffering and death.

Finally, at the end of Jesus' earthly ministry his honor as Son of God is challenged again, this time in the very public forum of the crucifixion. Once again there is a double reference to Jesus' claim to be God's Son. Matthew tells us: "Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying . . . 'If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.' In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel: let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to, for he said, "I am God's Son."'" (Matthew 27.39-43) The last taunt was a reference to Psalm 22.8: "All who see me mock me; they curl their lips and jeer; they shake their heads at me: 'You relied on the Lord—let him deliver you; if he loves you, let him rescue you.'" Like the devil, those who mock Jesus on the cross know how to quote scripture.

Jesus replies with a quote from the beginning of the same Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27.46) This is a prayer of complaint not a request for an explanation. Jesus is complaining that although he has been utterly faithful to God's commands and has carried out God's will, God has allowed him to undergo the terrible shame of crucifixion. Jesus has upheld God's honor, but God has not reciprocated by honoring Jesus, at least not yet. Even so, in Matthew's account Jesus remains loyal to the end and closes his life with a shout of victory. (Matthew 27.50. See Neyrey 1998, 139-162.)

On the First Sunday of Lent we ask what lesson Matthew had for his listeners by relating the story of Jesus' temptation. We also ask what message there is for us today. 4 The message to Matthew's church was: Since the church was "beset with hypocrites, miracleworkers, false prophets, and false teachers, she must remember that divine sonship is not primarily a matter of

working wonders but of understanding God's will in Scripture and carrying it out in trust and obedience." (Meier 1980, 31)

The message to us and to our Church is much the same. We are called to be children of God, God's daughters and sons, by being absolutely loyal to God, listening attentively to God's word, following God's commandments, and trusting in God regardless of the consequences for us.

Lent is a time for a course correction, a time for getting back to the business of being a Christian. It is a time for us to be particularly attentive to God's word in the Scriptures. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) and Matthew 25 would be particularly appropriate passages for meditation during Lent. There we find a summary of Jesus' view of what God is commanding us: work for justice and peace, forgive our enemies, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, etc.

In short, we are called to honor God by keeping God's commandments. We might not live to see success; we probably will not receive any accolades from our contemporaries; and our efforts might well seem insignificant in the face of the great evils that face humanity - militarism, poverty, hunger, homelessness, and disease. We must not try to force God's hand, but pray earnestly and work patiently while we "wait in joyful hope" for the coming of God's reign.

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In preparing these reflections, in addition to the biblical texts, I consulted the following works:

Fuller 1984 - Reginald H. Fuller, *Preaching the Lectionary. The Word of God for the Church Today* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1984), pp. 38-41.

Harrington 1991 - Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina Series Volume 1, A Michael Glazier Book (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), pp. 65-70.

Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992 - Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 41-42.

Meier 1980 - John P. Meier, *Matthew*, A Michael Glazier Book [1980] (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), pp. 28-31.

Neyrey 1998 - Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1998), pp. 139-162 and passim.

Pilch 1995 - John J. Pilch, *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A*. A Liturgical Press Book (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), pp. 49-51.

Senior 1998 - Donald Senior, *Matthew*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), pp. 57-60.