

## THE FAST AND THE FEAST

A Sermon for the first Sunday in Lent, 2011

On the Text: Propers for the Day and the Exhortation for Holy Communion

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This morning I bring you a hodge-podge, a gallimaufry, a mish-mash of topics, that might seem to be unrelated, but they are not. They are all tied together by one over-arching theme: the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the worship of him. As with many things, the whole is often greater than the sum of its parts. The church is more than all the people and what we do in it, but the church ultimately becomes the Bride of Christ.

Today is a special day in the life of the church. Its name on the church calendar and in the BCP is something of a paradox – The First Sunday in Lent. In the Gospel lesson, we look at the beginning of Jesus' ministry immediately after His Baptism. In the service today, in the Order for Holy Communion, we shall hear an Exhortation based on St. Paul's description of the Eucharist in 1 Corinthians 11 that I am required to read on the First Sunday in Lent. I am told this exhortation is seldom read in the Episcopal Church any more. We shall look at how all these things are parts of a larger whole that has great meaning for us.

First, let's look at Lent, and why the name of today is what it is in English. Recently, I have had more than one person ask me about Lent, why we have it, and where did its name come from. The idea for Lent, but not its name, came from a combination of several ideas, some of which don't seem to be related. First of all, the earliest Christians, who were mostly converted Jews, understood the need for fasting and practiced it. They passed this on to the Gentile converts, and the use of fasting was reinforced by the writing and publication of the Gospels and the Epistles. The early Gentile converts felt no need to observe the Jewish Sabbath. They felt that the day after the Sabbath, which was the day of the week of the Resurrection, was the day on which Christians should hold their weekly services as a sort of mini-celebration of Easter.

To go along with that came the idea of a Friday Fast in commemoration of the day of the Crucifixion. Both of those ideas caught on and became standard practice in the church.

The idea of being baptized into Christ's Death and Resurrection led to the practice of many baptisms being held on Easter. There is an early Christian document that was written some time in the second century called *The Didache* (the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles) that says that both the baptizer and those to be baptized should fast before the Baptism.

The use of a fast in preparation for Easter, which was already being done by many Christians, was mentioned by the early theologian, Irenaeus, in a letter to Pope Victor sometime between 189 and 199 AD. The idea for Lent grew out of this fast. We don't know exactly when it became forty days long, but it seems it gradually increased from one day, to two, to six, after which there are no records until the Council of Nicea in 325 AD. The records of that Council contain words for this fast in both Greek and Latin. In Greek, the word was **τεσσαρακοστή**, while in Latin it was, guess what(?), *quadragesima*(!), both of which mean *the 40<sup>th</sup> day*.

By the fifth century, various churches were using different amounts of time, for this season of fasting, some six weeks (42 days), some seven weeks (49 days). It took another 200 years before the 4 days from Ash Wednesday through the following Saturday were added as fast days in the 7<sup>th</sup> century to give a full 40 days of fasting in commemoration of Jesus 40-day fast in the desert, while the Sundays were kept as Feast days

So why is today's name, the First Sunday in Lent, sort of paradoxical? Well, some dictionaries give the definition of Lent as being the 40 days of fasting before Easter. Since today, and the other five of the six Sundays between Ash Wednesday and Easter are Feasts, they are not strictly *in* Lent, although they are surrounded by it. I guess calling today the First Sunday *amidst* Lent is awkward.

What I just did was a nerdy quibble, but it led you through something of a history of how the season of Lent came about. The *fast* days of Lent consist only of the week days, Monday through Saturday, from Ash Wednesday through Holy Saturday, which is the day before Easter; and there are 40 of them unless they are superseded by some great feast, which does happen. occasionally: once this year on the Feast of the Annunciation on March 25<sup>th</sup>, and Maundy Thursday is always a Feast day in honor of the Institution of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Quibbles aside, why is this season called Lent? The first answer is that the season is called different things in different languages, for example, the Roman Church still officially calls it Quadragesima. It just depends on the language. But why *Lent* in English? Well, I hate to tell you this, but the English we speak nowadays was originally a Germanic language, the language of the Angles and Saxons that invaded the British isles after the Romans left in the fifth century. By the 7<sup>th</sup> century the language was already called Anglisch. The season came to be called Lenct, from the verb lencten, L-E-N-C-T-E-N, which meant *lengthen*, which is what the days were doing in the Springtime before the celebration of Easter. From that, the early English got their word for the spring season, **Lenct** or **Lencte**.

So, we inherited the season of Lent from the early church, and we got its name from the Old English word for Spring. The only thing we did not get from the early church was their respect and understanding of need for fasting, whether at Lent or any other time. We also did not get the knowledge that fasts could vary from person to person and time to time, and that are many who are exempt from fasting, such as: babies and children, nursing mothers, the old, the sick, the infirm, those with diabetes or any other medical condition that might preclude it.

However, Jesus, as a healthy man of 30 years, was not exempt. And so we read in our Gospel lesson in Matthew 4:1-2: 1 "Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. 2 And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred." Now this happened immediately after Jesus was baptized, because the preceding two verses from chapter 3 tell us this: Matthew 3:16-17 16 And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: 17 And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. So, God the Father is pleased, and Jesus is led by the Spirit into the desert to fast and pray for 40 days before being tempted by Satan. I

think it is reasonable to assume that Jesus prayed during this time of fasting. From reading further in the gospels we know he often went out alone to pray.

There were two such 40 day fasts described in the OT, one by Moses described in Exodus 34:28 which says: **28 And he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he did neither eat bread, nor drink water. And he wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the ten commandments.** The other was done by Elijah as described in 1 Kings 19:7-8: **7 And the angel of the LORD came again the second time, and touched him, and said, Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee. 8 And he arose, and did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights unto Horeb the mount of God.** Moses and Elijah were ordinary men, not the Son of God, and with God's help, they were able to complete such long fasts. There is no doubt that Jesus could also do it, or that he was hungry when Satan came. But have you ever thought about who it was who met and talked to Jesus in the vision that Peter, Andrew, and John saw at the Transfiguration described in Matthew 17:1-9? It was Moses and Elijah, the only other two about whom it is written that they had also fasted 40 days.

But what happened when Satan came to tempt Jesus was a battle in which Satan was completely outgunned. Satan did not know it; and if he did know it, in his pride he could not admit it to himself. To admit that would be to declare Jesus the winner before the battle had even begun. It was a classic battle between good and evil, a battle of words between the personification of Evil, Satan, and the personification of good and holiness, Jesus Christ, one of whose names is The Word. As the battle is described, there are just three skirmishes in this battle. In the first skirmish, Satan attacks the human nature of Jesus and His hunger. Matthew 4:3-4 **3 And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. 4 But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.** Jesus answered Satan by quoting Scripture to Him, what Moses said to the people in Deuteronomy 8:3.

In the second skirmish, Satan counters with an attempt to see whether Jesus really trusts what God the Father has promised. Matthew 4:5-7 **5 Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, 6 And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. 7 Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.** Jesus quotes another saying of Moses, this time from Deuteronomy 6:16, a saying that is repeated in Isaiah 7:12. Again Satan has no reply to this, but it seems that Satan does not really understand who his opponent really is. He is told that no one should try to tempt, or test, God. Satan does not understand that this entire three stage battle is his attempt to test God in the person of Jesus Christ. What's more is that in this skirmish, he does not understand that he has upped the ante and is trying to pit one of the persons of the Trinity against another. He is trying to test God the Father to see if he would carry through on His promise to have angels protect Jesus, and he is testing the Son of God to see if He, Jesus, will help Satan by testing the Father. Satan loses that little try on both counts.

In the last skirmish, Satan counters with an attempt to appeal what he thinks might be Jesus' lust for power, a lust that consumes Satan and is something he thinks is inherent in every person, hoping that Jesus is only a man, and again, not knowing that He is truly the Son of God. When that lust arose in Satan, he was disloyal to God who had created him to be the most beautiful of the angels. Satan fires his last shot in Matthew 4:8-11 in the hope that Jesus will also be disloyal: **8 Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; 9 And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. 10 Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. 11 Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him.** Again Jesus quotes what might be called the essence of the OT, a distillation from Deuteronomy 6:13 and 1 Samuel 7:3. – that we are to worship and serve God and only Him.

Why was Jesus tempted? The answer should be obvious, that it was part of God's Plan, so that every one could see that Satan and evil had no power over Him. I have not found a better statement of it than Melville Scott's, which begins with a phrase from the Nicene Creed: **It was for us men and for our salvation; that we might not, when tempted, feel guilty and doubt of God's assistance in our hour of greatest need; that we might not lack an example to inform us, nor an assurance of sympathy to encourage us; and of sufficient grace to give us the victory.**

Matthew Henry says this is a fulfillment of Genesis 3:15, when God pronounces the curse on the serpent: **15 And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.** Jesus is the seed of the woman, and the bruising of His heel is simply the temptation and His hunger after the fast, while the bruising of Satan's head was his bafflement at his impotence, at his total failure, to get anywhere at all in tempting Jesus.

In Matthew 17:14-21, and Mark 9:17-29 we have the story of the miracle of Jesus' casting out a demon from a child that the disciple had not had any success in getting it to go out of the child. This is a story in which He shows the disciples the power of combining prayer with fasting. When he says of that sort of demon: Mark 9:29 **29 And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting."** Fasting is a means of grace; we should not shun it, if we can do it without harm to ourselves.

Some of you might have noticed in your bulletins that I titled this sermon, "The Fast and the Feast". If you noticed that, you may be wondering, Where's the Feast? In Jesus life, there was much fasting before the Feast, the Feast on that Maundy Thursday evening when He turned a Passover feast into the Lord's Supper, the Holy Eucharist. That Feast is before us, and we shall partake of it today on this day amidst the Fast days of Lent. This Feast is also a means of grace, and one that is even more powerful than fasting.

Our little celebrations of that Feast are but forerunners of a greater celebration of it at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb in which we hope to participate. This is mentioned only once, in the Bible Revelation 19:9 **9 And the angel said(1) to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are the true words of**

**God."** Jesus points to this Feast in His parables of wedding suppers, and St. Paul describes the importance of our earthly celebrations of it, in 1 Corinthians 11: 23-29, much of which you will hear in the Exhortation. Our celebrations of the Lord's Supper here can be considered rehearsal dinners for the Great Supper in Heaven when Jesus will again drink the fruit of the vine with His disciples.

It has long been a custom to fast on the Sundays on which one was going to partake of the Holy Eucharist. You have fasted and prayed, if not from regular food, certainly from the heavenly food of the most Blessed Body and Blood of Jesus Christ since he last time you partook of it. On these Sundays, in the midst of the days of fasting, come to the Lord's Table.

Come to the Feast!

AMEN!