

## A MIRROR FOR LENT

### Read Psalm 25. 1-10

It is customary to begin Lent by thinking about the temptations of Jesus in the desert, as recorded in Matthew 4 and Luke 4, and alluded to in Mark 1. Early Christians drew great comfort from the fact that Jesus had been tempted as we all are – ‘but without sin’ [Hebrews 2.18 & 4.15]. This made him approachable and empathetic; but it also set his example as one to be followed. In the gospel accounts of his temptations, it is notable that Jesus rebuffed the devil not by argument but by the use of Scripture; more precisely by quoting from the Law of God in Deuteronomy and also Psalm 91. Early Christians came to treasure the psalms as windows into the mind and experience of Jesus himself, for whom they were a primary instrument of prayer, privately and in the synagogue. To this day, the regular use of the psalms in prayer unites Christians with Jews in their worship and rich spiritual inheritance.

In his commentary on Psalm 25, Augustine said that ‘Christ speaks, but in the person of the Church; for what is said has reference to Christian people when they turn towards God.’ Medieval copies of the psalms often have titles which indicate how a particular psalm could be related to some aspect of the life of Jesus, or alternatively to the experience of the apostles; or to vicissitudes within the life of the Church as the Body of Christ at prayer. What is notable about Psalm 25 is that it is constructed using the Hebrew alphabet as a framework for memory and meditation: each line begins with a new letter of the alphabet. For Christians, it makes a brilliant mirror for contemplating our own life in the light of the life and experience of Jesus as recorded in the gospels.

*Unto thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul: O my God, in thee have I trusted; let not mine enemies triumph over me!*

The gospels record how diligent Jesus was in his own prayers, often waking early at dawn to go to a remote place to pray. How should we pray? The first step of prayer is to turn towards God and to offer to Him our soul, the very heart of our life, as the first priority of each new day: as in the words of another psalm, ‘early and eagerly will I seek thee’ [Psalm 63.1]. The second element of prayer is relationship – ‘O my God’ – and all relationships are built upon trust. Do we entrust each day to the Lord? If we do, we have nothing to fear from anyone. It is those who do wrong who have something to fear – the final judgement of God as revealed in Jesus. For he was betrayed by those who acted shamelessly, betraying his trust and that of God Himself.

*Show me thy ways, O Lord, and teach me thy paths. Guide me in in thy truth and teach me: for thou art the God of my salvation, and I wait upon thee all day long.*

When Jesus was alone in the desert, he was contemplating exactly what kind of Messiah he would be: a magician, a megalomaniac, or a manipulator of human hearts and minds? His adversary was, and is, all those things; and there are plenty of examples of human beings seduced down such destructive paths. They are not the ways of God, however. Jesus said, ‘I am the way, the truth and the life’ [John 14.6]. This means that every time a psalm reflects upon the way of God, Christians can apply it to Christ himself. So the question is whether we want to be shown the way back to God? Are we biddable as Christian disciples to listen and to learn, and is this a priority in our lives? Do we sense God throughout the whole day, or only when we remember to

say our prayers? What kind of relationship is it, however, that only turns to someone as an afterthought, or as a matter of occasional convenience?

*Remember me, O Lord, in thy tender mercy and lovingkindness, which have ever been of old. Remember not the sins of my youth, nor my many transgressions. According to thy loving kindness remember me for thy goodness' sake, O Lord.*

In prayer, we are called to remember God even as we ask Him to remember us. Note that in these lines the word 'remember' occurs three times. We are not to take God for granted. 'Remember' is a plea of love and also of humility. It is a plea of sorrow and apology for the many ways in which we have sat light to the commandments of God and disobeyed Him. The actual words of the psalm speak of the many acts of mercy and kindness that we receive from God all the time. The challenge of Lent is whether we leave his love for us unrequited. In the Garden of Gethsemane, we glimpse how the temptation to doubt God stalked Jesus to the bitter end. 'Remember me, O Lord!' This hope was expressed in his dying prayers on the Cross.

*Good and upright is the Lord; therefore will he instruct sinners in the way. The meek he will guide in judgement, and only to the meek will he teach his way.*

What Jesus revealed is the unshakeable goodness of God, and the depths of his love poured out for the salvation of human beings: for 'God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but should have eternal life [John 3.16]. God can be relied upon completely as a truly loving heavenly Father. The question of Lent is whether He can rely on us? We have to recognise our own sinfulness each day, and to shed any illusions about how we appear to God: we should pray, 'cleanse the thoughts of our hearts.' Only then can we be taught anything by God. Jesus is 'the way' that we are called to follow, the person from whose example we should be learning each day by reading the gospel regularly with our prayers. Meekness means being biddable, humble, attentive and loving. Jesus was this kind of person, and this is what made him such a brilliant teacher of his disciples and friends, as their memory of him recorded in the gospels confirms. God's way of teaching is one of guidance, enabling us to arise, to stand up, and to follow in the way of Christ from our own volition and with growing understanding. Being a Christian is thus a life-long education in the way of God as revealed in Jesus, for God's way is the way of intelligent love.

*All the paths of the Lord are lovingkindness and truth unto such as keep his covenant and his testimonies.*

This is a wonderful promise to make our own this Lent. Each of us has our own path to follow, but all paths lead to the Lord; and the closer we come to him, the closer we come to each other, and to all those saints and servants of Christ who have followed the same call. The rest of this psalm intimates the demands and costs of the path of Christ as it leads to the Cross. This promise reminds us that whatever happens, lovingkindness and truth are two sides of the same coin, being attributes of God and characteristics of the ministry and teaching of Jesus. Scripture serves to keep before us the covenant and the testimonies of God in both the Old and New Testaments. These were the foundations of the ministry and teaching of Jesus, as they are of the life of the Church itself. Lent is the season when we can make sure that the foundation of our own life is firmly laid upon the rock which is Christ.