

Christ's Ministry In Galilee

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GOD CAME to teach men truth and to free them from sin; so He came to the places where truth was threatened and sin flourished. He elbowed His way into the crowded market-place, walked the dusty roads, thundered against the violation of the Temple at the very height of a feast. He did not sit back, content with His perfection and graciously stooping to forgive any sinners who might come to Him. He went out on the highways and byways seeking the sinners, pursuing them like the Hound of Heaven He was, eagerly, anxiously, relentlessly.

He came that through Him we might have easy access to God. We needed His help, for it is not an easy thing to go to God, particularly when we are weighed down with sin; even though we know there is no place else to go, we still have our human pride and our human fear. The enemies of Christ unwittingly made clear to the sinners of all future ages what confidence and courage His familiar life with men had poured into the human hearts of His time by accusing Him of surrounding Himself with sinners and publicans. Sinners ever since have laughed with joy to learn that the men who had the most reason for terror were precisely the ones who came to the feet of the Son of God.

Of course, they came to Christ; He had made Himself one with men. He did not embrace the rigid fasting and penance of John the Baptist, for He did not wish to tower above men, striking terror into their hearts; rather He came down among men that they might more easily walk into His divine heart. He gave a perfect example in the absolutely necessary things and among these, rigid abstinence from food and drink is not included. Abstinence is not an end itself but a means by which men might attain to control and continence; the sinless Christ had no need of this means, so He lived as other men, eating and drinking.

All through His life, Christ felt the privations and tasted the joys of poverty. On His own testimony, He was hungry, thirsty, and without a place whereon to lay His head. Nor was this a condemnation of riches. It was no secret in Christ's time that riches can be an occasion of pride and offer opportunities for sins that are not open to the poor man; but then neither were the men of that time ignorant of the fact that poverty can be no less an occasion of sin, indeed, an occasion of all those sins a man will commit to seize the riches upon which his heart is set. It is neither riches nor poverty that count; but the poverty of spirit which is a casting aside of the trinkets of the world in the realization of how little they contribute to the perfection of man's life.

Men do not need riches for human living; they simply cannot get along without fellowship and law. It is small wonder that Christ insisted so strongly on these two. He came to perfect the imperfect law, yet His observance of that imperfect one was most exact; He came to liberate men from the burdens of the Old Law, but first He carried the burden Himself. None of His contemporaries could accuse Him of sin. He was no law breaker; for He would not have us miss the fact that the fruits of sin are degradation, subjection, and tyranny, not the liberty and perfection He came to give us. Even His indignant declaration that the Son of man was Lord of the Sabbath was not a rejection of law

but a condemnation of misinterpretation and of a vicious perversion of law. Clearly, the law of the Sabbath was not meant to forbid divine works; it did not prohibit the works necessary for life, even for corporal life; above all, it did not prohibit what pertains to divine praise and worship.

Now and then, the commands of the law seem unbearably heavy. If our human nature does not point this out to us, there is an angelic nature always ready to whisper it to us; for our fight for perfection is not only against our own nature, but against the princes, the powers, the dominations of the angelic host who lost their own battle long ago. The abstract assurance of divine help against these vastly superior forces is a grand comfort; in the actual heat of the battle, it is a more solidly comforting thing to our human hearts to have before our eyes the concrete story of divinity's own strategies against satanic cunning.

The temptation of Christ was just another of the devil's bad mistakes. He had to guess; and he guessed wrong. Not even an angelic intelligence could pierce through to the divinity of Christ, for that is something to be believed, not seen; the devil could see the sinless life of Christ and suspect the mystery, then remember the infant helplessness of Christ and doubt that God could make Himself so lowly. He could not believe, for belief flows only from a good will.

Up to the last minutes of Christ's life, then, the devil was on tenterhooks about this strange Man; was He really God, or was He merely man?

It was fortunate for us that he made the mistake of trying to find the answer to that question. At least, his mistake protects us from foolish pride or smug security in our own sanctity. For sanctity is no guarantee against temptation; it is an invitation to it. The devil hates saints, they approach so closely to God; and, with the stupid stubbornness that has marked all of his career, he continues to batter his head against the divinely protected wall again and again. Really, sanctity and good works constitute a kind of diabolic desert where there is neither shade nor rest for the evil one. In-deed, sanctity is a desert place in another sense, for the corridors of sanctity are seldom crowded and man always faces his greatest dangers alone; so it was that Christ underwent His temptation when He was alone in a desert place. It was His invariable custom to face first the hardest of the things He demanded from us.

He went at that difficult task in a fashion that leaves no doubt in our minds as to the method we must pursue. There is no better preparation for future temptations than present fasting and penance. We know very well that there is no time in our lives when we can depend upon quiet security, rest on our arms idly waiting for the next fight to come up; surely we cannot take any chances on the grounds that we have worn down our strength with laborious good works. It was to a tired and hungry Christ, tired and hungry from fasting and penance, that the devil came. Whatever the cause of the fatigue, it is just at that time, with our body protesting a bit, that the devil is most likely to make his attack; he was never one to overlook so powerful an ally as our sense appetite.

His diabolic strategy in the temptation of Our Lord is worth noting well. Since temptation must always come from the outside as far as our soul is concerned, it must be by way of a suggestion. Being what we are, suggestion has no chance for infiltration except along a path already made smooth for the journeys of our heart. The devil does not shock a saint into alertness by suggesting great crimes; he starts off with little, almost inoffensive things to which even the heart of a saint would make only a mild protest. So it was with the temptation of Adam; so also with the temptation of Christ. These two heads of the race could not be grossly attacked; they were to be subtly fooled. To our first parents, the devil made an intellectual appeal, a suggestion to that element of curiosity

in all of us, asking: “Why did God forbid this particular fruit?” With that wedge securely in, he became bolder, appealing to pride and vainglory with a promise that their eyes would be opened; it was only when definite progress seemed to have been made that the full horror of the temptation was made plain in his invitation to the extreme pride of rebellion — they should become like gods.

When the devil approached Christ, he used practically the same strategy — there is, after all, very little room for originality in the line of sin and temptation; he was perhaps a little more subtle with Christ, paying Him the same dubious compliment a bandit pays his victim in approaching him with extreme caution. He tempted Christ first with what even the most spiritual of men desire, the food necessary to sustain the body: “If You be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread.” From there, he went on to that to which even spiritual men are too often victim, ostentation and vainglory: “If You be the Son of God, cast Yourself down...” (from the temple). With inevitable grossness, he advanced a temptation that appealed not to spiritual but to carnal men, the appeal of the riches and the glory of the world, going even so far as contempt of God: “All these will I give You, if falling down You will adore me.”

The first thrust was not successful. Wisdom in the tempter would seem to indicate a complete change of attack, a search for some even subtler approach. But the devil is not wise, which is one of the reasons why he is a devil; the planned attack had to go forward, in spite of the failure of the first necessary manoeuvre, stupidly becoming clumsier at every step. It is no sin to trust in God, quite the contrary; but to plunge off a great height in deliberate temptation of God, demanding a miraculous rescue, that is a different matter. To desire riches and the honours of the world is not necessarily wrong; but to be willing to abandon God and adore the devil to attain those ends, there is no excuse for that. Christ was quite patient with the first two temptations, for, after all, He had come to conquer the devil by justice not by overwhelming divine power; at the third temptation, He lost all patience. He did more than reject the temptation; He dismissed the devil with a brusqueness that must have been gall to so proud a spirit. This was temptation not to be tolerated for an instant; for it was a direct attack, not on the things of men, but on God Himself.

That outburst of divine indignation sent the devil slinking away, still mystified by the God-man. When he had gone, the angels came and ministered to their Master.

We shall read once more of an angel ministering to a tired Christ; then it will be on the edge of His passion, as here He was on the threshold of His public life. Each was a beginning; and it is at just these moments that comfort is needed, for beginnings, particularly beginnings of divine things, are hard. Since then, it is not an angel but the Master Himself who brings comfort to the hearts of men courageous enough to begin.

From the desert, Christ returned to the cities of men and set off on His career of bearer of divine truth to men. Much later, this part of His life would be summed up with a simplicity whose beauty forbids adornment: He had done all things well. (Mark 7:37) He spoke with the appeal and persuasiveness of an orator reading the hearts of his audience as plainly as the page of an open book; He denounced evil with the thundering authority of a supreme legislator; He confirmed His doctrine by miracles, even more by the calm, persistent, quiet sinlessness of His life. All this was but the vehicle of His message. The doctrine itself surpassed anything that teachers of men have ever conceived; and it answered the deepest demands of the hearts and minds of men.

Yet, looked at objectively, the actual proposal of this doctrine seems to have been miserably limited. It was strictly held within the narrow limits of Palestine and, even there, was restricted to Christ's

own people, the Jews. Why did not Our Lord preach to all men? How could He expect the same results from the lesser teachers to whom He commissioned this world-wide preaching? The point is that the lesser teachers actually achieved greater results, thereby showing more plainly the power behind that teaching.

Christ's restriction of His preaching to the chosen people was part of that orderly procedure so perfectly proper to God's action. The promises of a redeemer and a Messiah (Messias) had been made to the Jews, not to the Gentiles; the Jews, then, should receive the fulfillment of these promises. They were the chosen people, they had had generations of preparation; they should be given the first chance to welcome the Messias...

He came to the Jews in fulfillment of divine promises, in the name of God's love of the race. His love was the strong love of God, a love great enough to be terribly severe. By their malice, the leaders of this chosen people were impeding the salvation of the whole race; they were rejecting the doctrine of Christ, which alone held out hope of salvation; their vices were corrupting the life of the people. This was not the time for a lover of the people and a teacher of truth to tread gently lest he hurt the feelings of some who were considered great among men. Of course Christ cried out against them, sparing them nothing; yet there was the full vigour of divine love in that violence, a love that embraced the leaders perhaps even more strongly than the people who followed them...

When in the last days of His life, Christ was called to account, He could say with complete truth: "I have spoken nothing in secret." He had not come to hide divine truth but to manifest it; He was not a miserly Master huddling over His knowledge in dark corners, gloating over His exclusive possession of it, afraid to share it lest He lose His mastery. The things He had to say needed nothing of the garments of sly ambiguity, which hide the ugliness of the obscene and allow it to slip furtively into the souls of men. Christ taught publicly: to crowds in the temple, on the sea shore, in desert places, on the high road. To the little group of apostles and disciples, He talked incessantly. He let slip no opportunity to publish His truth. Some things He spoke to the multitudes in parables, giving them the milk of children because they were not capable of the meat of men; clearly, it was better for them to have this than nothing at all. Even these parables were explained in detail to the apostles to whom it was given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God that they might instruct the children of men.

Many years after, closing his own attempt to put the teachings and deeds of Christ in the prison of written words, Saint John admitted the hopelessness of it: "There are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written every one, the world itself, I think, would not be able to contain the books that should be written." The world could not contain the books, only heaven can; it is quite impossible to contain the sublimity of the teachings of divine wisdom within the narrow confines of words. Christ Himself wrote no words beyond those few He scrawled in the sand to scatter the accusers of the adulteress; how significant that it should have been sand in which He wrote; He did His real writing on the hearts of men and thus forever scotched the petty error that His doctrine was not more than is contained in the written Scriptures...

While the written word did not befit the dignity of Christ, His miracles certainly did. There was nothing confining about them; rather, they threw open the vast spaces of infinity to the human mind. Indeed, their whole service is to lift the mind of a man above the limits of nature by bringing him into sharp contact with the Author of nature.

A miracle is a wave of divine power that lifts men up to the crest and lets them see the distant shore if only for an instant. More concretely, they are worked either to confirm the truth or to show the presence of God in the man who does the works of God. On both counts, Christ fittingly worked miracles.

The miracles of Christ, like all true miracles, were worked by divine power, for miracles are such precisely because they outstrip the powers of nature. It is true that Christ reached out and touched the leper to cleanse him, it was His human voice that awoke Lazarus, Magdalen knew from His loving glance long before He spoke that her sins were forgiven; but the hand, the voice, the eye, were merely instruments of divinity, channels which carried the power of God. Christ, even as an Infant in the manger, had both the divine power and the human instrumentality of that power, for He was both God and Man.

It is, however, an extravagance of unbridled imagination to picture the childhood and adolescence of Christ as a gloriously triumphant journey leaving an uninterrupted wake of miracles behind it. If there was bread in the house at Nazareth, it was because it had been earned by Joseph and his Son: if the clothes were clean, it was because Mary had washed them.

There was no point in miracles until some truth was to be confirmed; until it was time to manifest the divinity of Christ to all men. The first miracle, then, is that recorded as such by Saint John, the changing of water into wine at the marriage feast of Cana. It is comforting to remember that this first miracle was worked at Our Mother's request, that it was for such a human end as saving the host of Christ from embarrassment, that it was a benediction of such a human thing as marriage.

I have often wondered what the bridegroom said to the master of the feast in answer to his complaint about saving the better wine until the last. Probably he just smiled and shrugged his shoulders, hoping Christ would not give him away.

From this beginning to the very end, all the miracles of Christ had the common purpose of confirming the truth of divinity, of manifesting to men the presence of God among them. All were, of course, works transcending natural powers; all were done in Christ's own name. Again and again, He insisted that it was in confirmation of His claim to divinity that He worked miracles; if what He said were not true, then God Himself would have collaborated in a gigantic lie.

Certainly, the scope of the miracles of Christ was a plainly written documentation of His mastery over all the universe, that is of His divinity. Angelic beings bowed to His command in every expulsion of the demons from their possessed victims; the heavenly bodies offered their homage and submission when they covered their face against the spectacle of the death of God. Most constantly, however, His miracles revolved around His fellow-men; of these, the outstanding ones are the healing miracles, the miracles whose final goal was not the salvation of the body but the soul.

After all, He had come to save men, to enlighten their minds, and relieve them of the burden of sin. That no least doubt of His divinity might remain in the minds of men of good will, all irrational creation gave him unquestioning obedience.

These were proud days in the lives of the apostles. The simple fishermen of Galilee were living familiarly with the Lord of the universe. Before their eyes, Nature tumbled over itself in its eagerness to obey Him; the eyes of faith showed them the greater miracles of grace within the souls of men; they shared His confidence, listened to His patient reiteration of divine truth, even partook

of something of His infinite power on that mission where they were told to heal the sick, raise the dead, give freely of what they had freely received.

They returned from that journey bubbling over with enthusiasm, swelled a little with consciousness of self, to be met with the laconic word of the Master: "Let us go apart and rest awhile." That is, let us stop for a minute to think, to remember, to pray; after all, you are the same men you were before, not God. As the days of His life grew shorter, His warnings of His passion and death grew more plain; to the apostles, they were steadily unwelcome, even a little frightening, shaking that confidence and sense of power that had so recently come to them.

They had some reason for fright. He was starting them off on a long journey over a road that was rough and steep. His divine wisdom could easily understand that the comforting memories of three intimate years with Him would hardly be enough for them. In the kindness of His heart, He gave them concrete, ocular evidence of some of the joys that awaited them at the end of the journey. For an instant, there on Tabor, Christ unveiled to His beloved three the glory of His human soul shining through His human body.

Understand, this transfiguration was a revelation of human glory. It was essentially the same brilliance that is a permanent quality of the bodies of the saints after the resurrection, the brilliance that would have been constantly shining forth from the body of Christ had not a constant miracle been worked to prevent what would have overwhelmed men as it did the apostles on Tabor.

This glimpse of glory completed the dim sketch of the glory of the human body after the resurrection. Other vague details had been drawn when Christ passed through the closed womb of the Virgin, when He walked upon the water, when He passed unharmed through the hands of the Jews who attempted to apprehend Him before His hour had come.

This apex of human glory was not only for the men who were to come after Christ, but for those faithful ones who had preceded Him. Fittingly, then, Moses and Elijah (Elias) were present at that preview of the glory, in the name of all who had gone before; Peter, James and John, in the name of all who were to come after.

Those five witnesses were really a mighty company; the Law and the Prophets, the Head of the Church, the first of the apostolic martyrs, the most beloved of the disciples and greatest of the evangelists, the Sons of Thunder, and the Rock upon which Christ was to build His Church.

The transfiguration of Christ was really a revelation of the full significance of our position as adopted sons of God. By that adoption, we are made conformable to the natural Son of God, perfectly now by grace with its glory for the soul, perfectly in heaven with its glory for the body and soul. We enter the life of grace by baptism, the life of heaven by the light of glory. As at the baptism of Christ, so here again at His transfiguration, there is the divine witness to His natural Son-ship and a divine promise as to our adopted son-ship.

As at the baptism the Son was baptised, and the Holy Ghost appeared hovering over Him in the form of a dove, while the Father's voice was heard approving; so here on Tabor, the Son was glorified, the Father testified, and the Holy Ghost hovered over the scene in a luminous cloud.

They came down from the mountain a little shaken to set about the business of suffering and dying. But now, what a different task it was, not only for them but for all men; for here was the goal that explained all the hardships and difficulties of the journey — the vision of glory within a man now,

shining through his very body in heaven. Here was the secret of the glory of man: a human sharing in the divine life.
