

LUX EDMUNDI: REFLECTION: MARCH, 2017

The Gospel for the First Sunday of Lent in Cycle A is Matthew's account of the temptation of Christ (4:1-11). We find here food for thought and grounds for prayer for all involved in Catholic education in Ireland. Satan first urges Christ to turn stone into bread. Catholic schools in Ireland have sought to prepare the young people committed to their care, including – sometimes especially - those oppressed by poverty or injustice, “to earn a crust”, as the saying goes. They have helped them recognise and develop their God-given talents, acquire qualifications, and so make their way in the world. Admirable in itself as it undoubtedly is, this drive for “bread” has had, however, some unintended, but still deleterious, consequences for those meant to benefit from it. There is no doubt that pupils in some Catholic schools were driven with stick and strap towards academic success and the “bread” that accrued to them in life as a result was too often salted with a bitter resentment towards their former teachers and to all they stood for, religion included. Besides, the drive for “bread”, and for the examination results that eventually facilitated – for some at least - the purchase of that “bread” in large quantities, sometimes displaced the aboriginal drive to share with our charges “every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” and the past-pupils we commend as examples of success – if not, indeed, as templates of humanity – are those who have climbed highest, not necessarily on Jacob's ladder, but on whatever greasy pole they sought to conquer.

Satan next urges Christ to chance it, to jump from a huge height, to test if God would send his angels to be, as it were, the wind beneath his wings. This may be read as a typically – Satan *is* “the father of lies” - distorted version of the biblical truth that, if God is with us, it hardly matters who may be against. The notion, in turn, that God is more or less automatically with us because we do his work has, arguably, caused incalculable damage to the standing and, even more disastrously, to the mission, of the Church in Ireland. When we were in our pomp, we assumed we could do no wrong and assumed, therefore, that our policies and our practices must, *ipso facto*, be beyond reproach and beyond challenge. There was no possibility that opponents could be right. Thus, there never was anything like a real process of discernment, or a genuine examen of conscience, to test our assumption of moral superiority and nothing, therefore, like contrition, confession or satisfaction for anything at all we did, no matter what. How could there be any question of repentance if we could do no wrong and why would we need conversion if we were, obviously, really good people? This sense of our own impeccability bore unspeakably sad and bitter fruit for many, especially “the least”, who had the utter misfortune to end up in our so-holy hands.

Satan finally urges Christ to bend the knee to him and so win supreme authority throughout the world to do all the good Christ had, in fact, come to do. In the first 50 years of our independence, the Church, first, in the Irish Free State, then, in the Republic of Ireland, expected and got full co-operation from the State in all to do with education. Ministers openly acknowledged that, as far as education was concerned, the State was at the service of the Church and Catholic school authorities seldom hesitated to press their advantage in this context. We brooked neither dissent nor disagreement in anything to do, not just with our schools, but with any schools. “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely”. We became authoritarian and used our authority, not for service, but for power. We could, and should, have washed the feet of those over whom we were set. We didn't and we will answer for it at the Judgement. “Those were different times”, “We did our best”, “It was only a few of us”: These statements for the defence will not get us off. We need, this Lent, to open our eyes to God's truth, our hearts to his justice, and we *do* need to repent.