

A REFLECTION ON THE GOSPEL FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT – LUKE 4:1-13

(The author of this reflection is a friend of Fr Jock who lives in Northumberland)

Going without alcohol is something of a breeze when compared to being a supporter of Sunderland Football Club. 1973 aside (the year Sunderland, against all odds, beat Leeds United at Wembley in the English FA Cup Final), life as a supporter has been a constant vale of tears. There have been highlights when disappointment briefly was replaced with moments of ecstasy; when dreams could evict reality, but those same dreams would disappear like the steam that pours from the kettle spout. Speaking of dreams, I often remember my Uncle Ron who promised me a 10-Bob Note (50p) if I could work out an answer to the question: *Where does a flame go, when it goes out?* To a ten-year old who always preferred matters scientific to matters poetic, I was on the brink of fame to rival that of Einstein – if only I could find an answer, an answer to my dreams and own a real ten-bob note!

Dreams are as seductive as they are elusive. ‘What would it mean to you if you were to win the jackpot?’, asks the inane presenter. ‘Oh, it would mean the world to me, it would be the answer to all my dreams.’, answers the starstruck contestant. For a brief moment all reality is suspended – and with it all sense and sensibility. ‘We’re in the business of selling dreams’ cries the snake-oil salesman and out goes our dwindling grasp of reality like that elusive steam disappearing from the kettle spout. Dreams appeal to all that is base within us. Appeal to a man’s dreams, offer him a tempting solution that seems as uncomplicated as it is achievable, and he will be as putty in your hands. Jesus has been on a forty-day retreat. He hasn’t eaten and Luke tells us quite simply that he was hungry. We might be tempted to offer an incredulous response to Luke: ‘Really? Surely not!’ Respectfully, we take Luke literally and keep our opinion to ourselves. Satan tries his luck. *If you really are the Son of God, you could, if you wanted to, turn these stones into bread.* Jesus’ response is the more telling. *Scripture says Man does not live on bread alone.*

We are witnessing a new phase in the battle between Jesus and Satan. We are on shaky ground, very shaky ground – and the very soul of humanity is under threat. In 2016, Donald Trump, during an interview, maintained that he read The Bible ‘a lot’. The interviewer asked, not unreasonably, ‘What is your favourite passage?’ I’m sure that you will have your own, I certainly have mine. In the clearest indication that Trump was perhaps exaggerating when he said, ‘a lot’, and also suggestive that he had read very little, he regained composure, and after a lengthy pause answered: ‘All of it – I like all of it – a lot!’. If he had read any of it, he may have come across the 24th verse of the 6th chapter in Matthew’s Gospel. *No man can be the slave of two masters: he will either hate the first and love the second or cherish the first and treat the second with contempt. You cannot serve God and Mammon – be it wealth or power or land.* This malaise affects not just the United States of America – be they united or not – it also affects much of the so-called civilised West. We have forgotten Jesus in our pursuit of all things material. If Jesus insists that we cannot serve two masters, the question we all have to face as our Lenten journey begins, is ‘*which Master am I following*’. Jesus asserts that our choice is indeed binary. It’s one or the other. We aren’t allowed a bit of one with a flavouring of the other – like thinly spread marmite on a slice of wholewheat sourdough bread or truffle shavings on a risotto. No such luxury of choice for us.

Satan goes on to invite Jesus to worship him. *Worship me and I will make all of these kingdoms of the world, yours. I will leave you alone. All you have to do is worship me.* Jesus’ response is directed as much to you and me as it is to Satan: *You must worship the Lord, your God and serve him alone.* Many snake-oil salesman will offer all manner of panacea solutions, promising to make our dreams come true. *Caveat emptor.* Real peace of mind is to be found in close union with God-made-man, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Our Lenten journey has begun. I love the Bible, I love absorbing God’s word: breathing it, living it, loving it. As part of my Lenten observance this week, I will be unafraid. Especially I will not be afraid to enjoy the beautiful world and beautiful people that surround me. I will continue to believe that as I give to the world, so the world will give to me. Do you care to join me? Together we can be so powerful and so effective, and we can go some way to kicking Satan into touch – at least in our own lives.