

Testa est Anna
(Paula)
ARGO. 310
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→ "Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit through the wilderness, being tempted there by the devil for forty days."

For 40 days and 40 nights Moses fasted, then brought down from Mt Horeb the contents of the Covenant. For 40 years the people wandered in the desert, then came to the Promised Land. Jesus' fasting and temptation in the desert recapitulates all that, and carries a symbolic meaning that is in itself illuminating. But this is not to say that these events are ^{only symbols or myths,} symbolic, and it's important not to let them disappear into symbolic interpretations. Jesus is flesh and blood, and His testing was real, for (as the New Testament says) "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who was tempted in every way that we are." The church recalls the temptations of Jesus, as Lent begins, because they remind us of a crucial truth about our own real testing. For we can hardly expect to grasp how we have sinned if we do not grasp how we have ^{are} been tempted. But in our day and in our western way of living, we have trivialized temptation so much and think of it in merely moral terms, an impulse to break a law or to go against our own conscience directing us from within to do or not to do. We too rarely reflect that, for God's chosen, beneath each moral temptation is a religious test. So for example, in the Old Testament "temptation" always means that a partner in the Covenant is being tested. Will God be faithful? Will the people be loyal? Will He or they fulfill the conditions agreed to and deliver what was promised? The pagans and unbelievers are never said to be tempted, only the Chosen People. The Lord tests the holy, and in their turn the people test their God. Ps 78 puts it poignantly: 'Again and again they tempted God'

Within the history of His people, Jesus comes to bring the Covenant to perfection and must determine what kind of Messiah He will be, for His people have varying expectations. Will He give them what they want: manna, political dominion, an end to risky responsibility for themselves? Or will He lead them to suffer the consequences of humankind's freely chosen sin, beginning in the pain of outraged conscience and ending in physical death, the ultimate self-destructive expression of our willful rebellion? Jesus made such decisions, and they are the more public meaning of His temptations in the desert. About bread, for instance: God had promised to provide food for His people and kept His promise by giving them manna in the desert. But they failed on their side, craving fleshpots, jangling in discontent, then doubt, then unbelief. Citizens of a consumer society should have no trouble understanding what the people went through, since our own society is structured to keep us from ever being content with what we have. It must do, if people are to keep on consuming. That pervasive discontent seeps into the whole of our lives, striking far deeper than a hankering for the newest gadget, trinket or fad. Finally, unless we are reflective, our discontent stretches to the way God has furnished our world. Unhappy with our brand of manna, we stew in discontent and doubt, and can easily come to disbelieve that God cares very much. Those who find that hard to credit need only examine what they mean when asking God to 'give us this day our daily bread'. Bread alone? If not, what else? In Jesus' second temptation the issue is to whom He will owe His victory, the victory of His Kingdom. Shall there be homage done, and to whom? Jesus' answers to Satan are taken from the Bk of Deuteronomy, the passage which tells the story of how, when the Israelites came into the Promised Land,

they promptly forgot God, despite the warnings not to do so. This is the religious temptation. Any person can live out law and conscience and become holy and beautiful, but Christians have made a covenant to do more: You shall do homage to the Lord your God. Perhaps our temptation is precisely to serve our consciences instead of our God. Perhaps our failure is thus to do homage to technological man and put our trust in him. What Kingdom do we mean: Thy Kingdom come? ||

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1' 2:36

A prayer in music now: *Salvator Mundi* **MUSIC** (Tallis: *Salvator Mundi*)
by Tallis **PRAYERS**

Jesus' third temptation,

to test God in direct action, brings us back to moral questions at a deep level. For in violating law & conscience, Christians take a terrifying risk much like throwing themselves off the temple to require God to keep them in faith and save them. For Christian moral practice comes from Christian belief and then in turn protects that belief from the abrasions of daily life, a little bit like the way the tortoise's shell grows out of its fleshy life and then becomes its home. Christians who persist in serious sin tear away the defenses of their belief and leave God to keep it alive all the same. The deterioration is clear. When we violate our consciences, we release a virulent disorder into our lives. Too much violation, and we live in confusion, with darkness & ugliness in inner life, and soon will find it too difficult to believe in a God of love and providence. But when we pass these tests, as Jesus did, and live grateful to God, worshipping Him, trusting His Spirit, there are further tests of our belief in God and hope in Him: Satan awaits another opportunity, as St. Luke's gospel says: and that means the Passion & the Cross, ^{when test} too leads