

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The First Sunday in Lent
February 18, 2018

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There is a strange little story in the middle chapters of First Kings. Solomon's son Rehoboam had made a quick mess of his new reign and the kingdom had been divided in two. Another son, Jeroboam, who had previously fled from his father after an *earlier* rebellion, was now made king over all Israel except Judah. Rehoboam kept Judah. Jeroboam was even less faithful to the Lord than Rehoboam, and the prophets turned against him.

In chapter thirteen an unnamed prophet confronted Jeroboam at Bethel. The Word of the Lord was given so emphatically that the prophet was warned to return home by a different route. On his way, however, an old prophet found him and said, "I also am a prophet as you are, and an angel told me: Bring him back with thee to thine house, that he may eat bread and drink water." Scripture adds ominously, "*But he lied to him.*" Sadly the prophet accepted the old man's invitation and went back, and that was the end of the prophet's vocation, *and the end of him*. It is a little-noticed episode. Perhaps these chapters get lost in the shuffle of pages between the affairs of King Solomon and the sudden and dramatic appearance of Elijah the Tishbite!

The old prophet who lied may represent self-love, which, after all, comes to us in various disguises. Part of the work of habitual prayer is to throw off these disguises so our intentions may be pure. Self-love never stops trying to deflect us from purity of intention. Those intentions are pure to the degree in which self-love has died in them.

The little story in First Kings 13 makes sense when we understand the old prophet as the self-love of the man of God, lying to himself and luring him to accept a lower calling than the one from the Lord. A clue to this interpretation comes at the very end of the story. After having buried the man he lied to, the old prophet leaves instructions that when the time comes *he is to be buried in the same grave*. It is all a reminder of what Saint John Chrysostom once told us. The devil most of all tempts those whom he find alone.

That is certainly what is going on in Our Lord's temptation in the wilderness. God Incarnate lived in the same basic human equipment issued to you and me. Self-love

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must have told Jesus He did not have time to go into the wilderness. But the Holy Ghost, we are especially told, led Him there. Fidelity to prayer enabled Jesus to reject the lure of the lower and always accept the call of the higher.

In the wilderness it was suggested to Jesus His body needed to be satisfied. It was also put to Him that if He did something suicidal (like jumping off the temple roof) it would show He had faith. A voice told Jesus His mission would succeed if He got the whole world to come to Him, never mind the means. All this shows the many disguises and appeals of self-love. But the Lord had God's answer to each. He did not want the world simply to come to Him and remain unchanged. It was of no interest to Almighty God to fill churches with people who then go out exactly as they came in. *The call of the Church is not to fill pews but to fill Heaven!* In all these ways Christ pulled the mask off self-love. And when He did that it was the devil who stood exposed.

It is a majestic figure we see on the First Sunday in Lent. Our Blessed Lord is going into the wilderness to fast and pray. In Christ God is a man assaulted by all the lures of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and going into the wilderness to battle for you and me. Think of Him doing that! Then think how our lives can often seem so small and petty and doing nothing in return for His love. He is ready to face forty days and forty nights and do anything else for us love can do. The devil can't defeat Him. In fact the only thing that can defeat Jesus in our souls is our self-love.

Lent invites us to focus on the fact self-love is always coming at us in some way. The only way to defeat it is to be quite straight with ourselves, and certainly quite straight with God. We learn to see clearly only by penitence and prayer. Then we too can pull down the disguises from the false prophet of our self-love and send him packing. When we do, we will find ourselves going home by a different way from the way we came.