

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Maundy Thursday
April 1, 2021

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On the 1st Sunday of Lent we are told about Our Lord's temptation in the wilderness. Christ had the victory over Satan. But St Luke tells us of an ominous note at the end of that victory. "All the temptations being ended, the devil departed from Him *for a time*." That can only mean the devil came back! St Luke tells us nothing more, but St John does. The Fourth Gospel remembers Our Lord Jesus, at the conclusion of the Last Supper, saying, "I will not now speak much with you, *for the prince of this world cometh*, and in me he hath not anything."

The Lord cut off His own after-dinner remarks because He had an appointment to keep. We would put it this way: "We've got to go. Someone is waiting for me." So Jesus and His disciples went to Gethsemane. And the "someone waiting" was the devil! Jesus was going out to meet that old enemy who in the desert temptations had been roundly defeated.

St Matthew's Gospel also helps us understand this confrontation. He tells us the Lord Jesus had warned His disciples Gethsemane on that moonlit night was a dangerous place! "Watch and pray" the Lord had said, "lest ye enter into temptation." In other words, evil spirits were afoot! There are only two places in the gospels where angels ministered to the Son of God. That happened after the temptations in the wilderness. And the second time was right here: during the Lord's agony in the garden. You are I are put on notice: Gethsemane was indeed a dangerous place!

How do we even *know* about the Lord's agony? The disciples fell asleep. So they cannot be our primary source. The *devil* was there. But he does not go about trumpeting his defeats! *That leaves Our Lord Himself*. Scripture gives us a clue. It says during the forty days between Easter and the Ascension the Risen Lord told His disciples many things. The gospels only give us a fraction of those conversations. St John says if they were all told: "The whole world could not contain the books." That is hyperbole. But we get the point.

The point is the Lord Jesus wanted us to know about Gethsemane. The devil never quite figured out God Incarnate. The old serpent would not have dared approach and tempt the Lord God! But Christ's *humanity* was fair game. So are you and me.

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The devil comes to us working on our minds with good and reasonable suggestions, such as Our Lord faced both in the wilderness and in Gethsemane. You can just hear it! “Escape the ordeal of the Passion, Jesus. It is so easy to just keep going. There is no reason to stay in Gethsemane tonight. Every other night you have gone back to Bethany to sleep. It’s safe there. *You’ll* be safe. And then you can enjoy the Passover with your friends.”

We are told Jesus knelt in the garden and sweat poured from Him. This was an indication of the struggle within. Self-preservation is a powerful motive for action. This man is God. *But this God is also completely man.* And this beautiful man would not be exempt from any temptation on human nature that had not sin in it.

There is no mistake in the gospel. The mistake is when people think of Jesus as a philosopher, or teacher, or prophet, whose wisdom is optional and can be collected and placed on our bookshelves. But the gospel good news does not give us that option. The gospel is quite clear. This man stayed in Gethsemane *because He came to die for us.*