**THE WAY EVERLASTING: SERMONS BY JAMES DENNEY**

**16. WRONG ROADS TO THE KINGDOM by JAMES DENNEY**

*"Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He afterward hungered. And the tempter came and said unto Him, If Thou art the Son of God, command that these stones become bread. But He answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. Then the devil taketh Him unto the Holy City, and he set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and saith unto Him, If Thou art the Son of God, cast Thyself down: for it is written, He shall give His angels charge concerning Thee; And in their hands they shall bear Thee up, lest haply Thou dash Thy foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, Again it is written, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. Again, the devil taketh Him unto an exceeding high mountain, and showeth Him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; and he said unto Him, All these things will I give Thee, if Thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan; for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve. Then the devil leaveth Him; and, behold, angels came and ministered unto Him."*

*Matthew 4:1-11*

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell the story of the temptation of Jesus in the same connexion: it followed close upon His baptism. His baptism was for Jesus the occasion of great and uplifting experiences; he saw the heavens open, and the Spirit descending and abiding on Him; He heard the heavenly voice, "Thou art My beloved Son; in Thee I am well pleased". But this hour of spiritual exaltation was followed by a period of depression and conflict. Was it possible for Jesus to live his life through on the high plane to which it had been raised at His baptism? Could He go back into the common life of man, with all its disquieting possibilities, and in spite of the tempting alternatives which it presented, in spite of the painful pressure which it put upon Him, maintain the consciousness and the character of the Son of God? This was the question which He faced in the wilderness. A mocking writer on the life of Christ says of another situation in it, "One is not the Son of God every day". What the temptation story shows is the determination of Jesus, asserted from the very beginning, in the face of all compulsions and seductions, to be the Son of God, and nothing but the Son, every day - to be true, in all that the Father gave Him to do, to the heavenly voice and the gift of the Spirit.

We may take it for granted that Jesus did not speak to His disciples of this great crisis in His life merely to get an outlet for the emotion which attended it, or to gratify curiosity on their part about His history. He told them these things because they were important for them. As it has been put, these are not the temptations of Jesus, they are the temptations of the Christ. They are not the temptations of a private person, but of the person whose calling it was to establish the kingdom of God in the world; and they have the interest for all of throwing light on the true nature of that kingdom by exposing alike false though seductive conceptions of it, and false though alluring paths which might be supposed to lead to it. It is a wrong way to put this if we say that the temptations are not personal, but official; there is no proper sense in which the term official can be connected with Jesus. They are the temptations of the person whose calling it was to bring in the kingdom of God, and they recur to everyone who is interested in the same age-long task. They are the temptations of all churches, of all Christian workers, of all who have ideals in their life at all. It is necessary to be on our guard against false ideals, and even more against false methods of pursuing true ones. It is this which gives the story of our Lord's trial and victory perennial interest.

**1.** The first temptation has indeed a more private aspect: it is connected with the fact that after His long fast Jesus hungered. "If Thou art the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." The Son of God and hungry! the tempter seems to insinuate, is not this a contradiction in terms? You cannot really be the Son of God, if your life is exposed to privations so cruel. There must be some mistake about that heavenly voice: you must have dreamed you heard it. Renounce your faith in a heavenly Father, and in His unfailing love and care, and help yourself in any way you can. To read the temptation thus implies of course that the suggestion to turn the stones to bread is a mocking one: the assumption is that the thing cannot be done. Certainly we cannot do it, and it is because we cannot that this temptation, in this aspect at all events, may come to any child of God. We have heard in the Gospel a voice from heaven, a voice sealed on our hearts by the Spirit, telling us that we are the sons of God: can it be true, we are tempted to ask, when poverty comes to us, or hunger, or pain? Can we hold to the heavenly Father under such pressure, or since He has not given us the power to turn the stones into bread, to annul every physical evil, must we renounce Him, like Job, and die? Must we take our life into our own hands as though God were a word without meaning? Jesus endured this temptation and overcame. Even under the pangs of hunger he held fast not simply His integrity like Job, but His Son-ship. His relation to God remained deeper, more vital, more certain than anything that could befall Him; no privation or pain whatsoever would make Him renounce God, or live in any other relation to Him than that of a trustful and obedient child. And is not this power to assert the superior reality of the inward and spiritual against all that is outwardly disconcerting the very pith of true religion? We need not pretend to understand the purpose of all privations, or say that we can justify the ways of God with man to the last detail: but if there is not in man a power to assert his sonship through privations and in spite of them, our Lord has lived in vain.

But the main interest of this temptation is wider. As Son of God, and called to establish His Father's kingdom in the world, Jesus was called at the same time to win an ascendency over men for God. He looked abroad on the world, especially on the world as it was to be seen in Palestine, and He saw various lines along which such ascendency could be sought and acquired. The very first was the one which assailed Him in this temptation. It would be easy for Him to command ascendency over multitudes, and to do it without delay, if He made it His business to turn stones into bread. If He made bread the first thing, the foundation of the kingdom - if. He adopted the principle that once men's physical necessities were supplied, and hunger, cold, and toil out of the way, the kingdom would come of itself- everything would be plain sailing for Him. This was a real temptation to Jesus just because He knew what hunger was, and because He had infinite sympathy with the poor. He was hungry here in the wilderness, He was weary and hungry as He sat by Jacob's well, He was so hungry in the last week of His life that He would gladly have eaten the berries from a tree by the way side. He lays extraordinary emphasis on the duty of charity; it is the unpardonable sin, which leads to eternal punishment, when He can say to anyone: "I was anhungered and ye gave Me no meat". Once, moved with compassion, He did feed five thousand men in a desert place. But what was the result? It was that this first temptation recurred: they wanted to take Him by force and make Him their king. This was the kingdom they wanted, a kingdom built on bread. But it was not the kingdom Jesus had come to set up. He withdrew Himself from that multitude, and retired to pray with God alone. He sent out the Twelve to face the rising storm on the lake, and in laborious toil and imminent danger of death forget this spurious hope. And soon after, in the synagogue at Capernaum, He spoke the searching words that drove the bread-seeking disciples from Him and showed the true basis of the kingdom. "Ye seek Me, not because ye saw the signs, but because ye did eat of the loaves and were filled. Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that which endureth unto eternal life." Jesus was the friend of the poor, who went about doing good, but He felt it to be a temptation of the devil to base His kingdom on bread, and to count upon an allegiance evoked by loaves and fishes.

This temptation is always with the Church, and it is not the less a temptation that there are many at the present time who turn it into an accusation. The Church, we are constantly being told, does not care for the poor: it is a capitalist institution. People may starve for all it will do to help them. We would believe in it if it made our bread its first care, but if it does not, we will have nothing to do with it. Voices like these are sometimes the modern equivalent of the voice which whispered to Jesus in the wilderness, "Command that these stones be made bread. Go about the country multiplying loaves and fishes all the time." The answer to them is partly to say that they are false; the Church, as everyone knows who knows anything about it, does care for the poor. Blot out what Christian people do for the poor in any great city, and how much would remain? But partly also it is to point out that the demand which is here made upon the Church is one to which, if it is to be true to Christ, it cannot accede. It dare not, either for itself or for others, contemplate a kingdom of God founded upon bread. It must have pity for the poor - it must feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick, or be lost for ever; but it must have the hardness to say to itself and to all men, even though they are poor, Seek first the kingdom of God; Labour not for the meat which perisheth; Man shall not live by bread alone. There are times when these are very unpopular things to say, and when there is therefore a strong temptation not to say them, but they were all said by Jesus. What comes first is sonship to God, faith in the Father, the love, trust, and obedience of a child; to this, everything else is to be postponed, in the possession of this every trial is to be overcome. The Church dare not enlist under the banner of those who think that a programme of what are called social reforms - the kind of reforms which can be carried in Parliament - will bring in the kingdom of God. It cannot do this anymore than Jesus could enlist under the banner of those who would have made Him a king by force. It may quite well be its duty to sympathize with such reforms and to promote them; but it is its specific function to make plain that in the kingdom of God a perpetual primacy belongs to the spiritual, and that it may be the trial of any child of God, in humble faith in the Father, to maintain his sonship through hunger, pain, and death.

**2.** The second temptation is of quite a different kind. As Jesus looked out upon the society around Him, He saw that one of the simplest ways of winning ascendency over men was to appeal to their love of the marvellous. If He only dazzled their senses sufficiently they would throng to His feet, and He would be able to do anything with them He pleased. This is what is imaginatively put in the temptation of the pinnacle. The background of the scene (we must suppose) is the courts of the temple, thronged with worshippers; and as Jesus descends through the air from the dizzy height, and alights among them uninjured, they crowd around Him and hail Him enthusiastically as the Messianic King. We know from the New Testament that this was in principle an appeal continually being made to Jesus. "Jews demand signs," says St. Paul, describing the habitual temper of his countrymen. From beginning to end they demanded them from Jesus. "They came and tempting Him asked Him to show them a sign from heaven." "They mocked Him saying, Let Him now come down from the cross and we will believe Him." The idea is that miraculous works, dazzling, overwhelming, dumb- foundering, are the basis on which the kingdom of God can be built. Overpower the senses of men with wonders, and you will win their souls for God. This was for Jesus radically false, and it contained a temptation which He steadily resisted. He never worked a miracle of ostentation or display: His miracles had all their motive in love, and it was the love in them which bore witness to God. He trusted God, but He did not challenge Him; the works that He did were not venturesome audacities of His own, they were the works that the Father gave Him to do. He never renounced moral sanity, as though something could be done for God beyond its limits which could not be done within them. He trusted God, certainly, but He knew the difference between faith and insane presumption, and He knew that no impression made on the senses, however profound, could establish God's sovereignty in the spirit.

This temptation also has its lesson for all who are interested to-day in the coming of God's kingdom. There is always a tendency in the Church to trust to methods which appeal rather to the senses than to the soul, or which are believed to be reaching the soul though they never get past the sense. They may be cruder or more refined, sensational or connected with the symbolic side of worship, but the common character of all is that they fall short of being rational and spiritual. How tempting it is to trust to such impressions, as though the coming of the kingdom were really secured by them - to trust, for example, to the feeling of awe and solemnity which comes upon us as we enter a great cathedral, or to the thrill which passes through us as we listen to the pure, passionless voice of a boy singing, "As pants the hart for water brooks," or to the power of some great preacher's eloquence, or to the inexplicable influence of a sacrament, celebrated with mysterious reverence and splendour. How tempting it is, yet how completely beside the mark! The only Church which claims to perform a miracle as the very centre of its worship falls whenever it makes the claim before this temptation. To turn bread and wine, under the very eyes of men, into the body and blood, soul and divinity of the Son of God, and to do it with mysterious and elaborate ceremonial, would be a miracle as astounding as for Jesus to throw Himself down from the pinnacle of the temple and to light on earth un harmed - as astounding, and, in the impression it produced, as irrelevant to the work of God. No doubt such things make an impression and have an influence; but they are not the influence and the impression through which that kingdom of God can come for which Jesus lived and died. How little He had of all that churches are tempted to trust in now! How little there is in the Gospels about methods and apparatus! Jesus had no church nor hall; He spoke in the synagogues when He had the opportunity, but as willingly and prevailingly in the fields or by the seashore, in a boat or a private house. He had no choir, no vestments, no sacraments, and we may well believe He would look with more than amazement upon the importance which many of His disciples now attach to such things. "He spake the word unto them," that was all. The trust of the Church in other things is really a distrust of the truth, an unwillingness to believe that its power lies in itself, a desire to have something more irresistible than truth to plead truth's cause; and all these are modes of atheism. Sometimes our yielding to this temptation is shown in the apathy which falls upon us when we cannot have the apparatus we crave, sometimes in the complacency in which we clothe ourselves when we get it and it draws a crowd. This is precisely the kind of crowd which Jesus refused to draw. The kingdom of God is not there, nor is it to be brought by such appeals. It is not only a mistake, but a sin, to trust to attractions for the ear and the eye, and to draw people to the church by the same methods by which they are drawn to places of entertainment. What the evangelist calls "the word" - the spiritual truth, the message of the Father and of His kingdom - spoken in the spirit and enforced by the spirit, told by faith and heard by faith - is our only real resource, and we must not be ashamed of its simplicity.

**3.** The last of our Lord's temptations is the one which has been most variously interpreted, which is another way of saying the one which has been least certainly understood. The tempter takes Jesus to a high mountain, shows Him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them, and says, "All these things will I give Thee, if Thou wilt fall down and worship me". It is easy to see the connexion of this temptation with the baptism. The same voice which pronounced Jesus Son had also pronounced Him heir. The same Psalm which says to the Messiah, "Thou art My Son, to-day have I begotten Thee," says also, "Ask of Me, and I will give Thee the heathen for Thine inheritance and the uttermost parts of the earth for Thy possession". Jesus was born to rule, and He was conscious of it in the very depths of His being. He had a kingly nature, men naturally felt His ascendency, it was He whose right it was to reign. No one was so capable of using power well. All that He saw was properly His inheritance, and the question before His mind in the wilderness was how He was to obtain effective possession of it. How was He to get a foothold in the world as it was, from which He might advance to its conquest? As such questions stirred in His mind, and He looked out on the world which was to be the scene of His sovereignty, another temptation, another delusive possibility of action, was presented to Him. He saw that there was a great power already established in the earth: was it conceivable that if He recognized that power He might be able to obtain help from it? No doubt it was the power of evil, but one of the terrible things which experience teaches is that evil is a power. It wields vast resources, it can offer immense bribes. In Luke the tempter is represented as saying, "All this has been handed over to me, and to whomsoever I will I give it." This has struck some as transparently false, but if it were transparently false there would be no temptation in it. The possibility of the temptation lies in the two facts that the sovereignty over the world belonged of right to Jesus, as the Son and representative of God, and that an immense and actual power in the world was unmistakably wielded by evil. Could Jesus make any use of that power? Could He, in order to obtain a footing in a world where evil was so strongly entrenched, give any kind of recognition to evil? Could He compromise with it, acknowledging that it had at least a relative or temporary right to exist, and making use of it till He could attain a position in which He would be able to dispense with its aid? This is the real question in the third temptation. It is not that Jesus was tempted to seek a worldly instead of a spiritual kingdom, or a kingdom based on force or fraud instead of love - a kingdom like Rome or Parthia instead of heaven; it is that He is tempted to accept the alliance of evil in establishing His kingdom, to take the help of the devil in the service of God. But to get the Son of God to admit that evil had to be squared somehow, and that an irreconcilable attitude to it was impracticable, and would prevent the kingdom of God from ever getting under way, would be to defeat His mission altogether. Hence at this point Jesus repels the tempter with passion - Get thee behind Me, Satan - as feeling how powerful was the temptation and how critical. We seem to hear Him saying to Himself as He says afterwards to all His disciples: "All the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them! What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and lose himself?"

It hardly needs to be said that this temptation also remains with the Church. Evil is still a great power in the world, and as long as it is so the question will continue to arise whether it is not a power of which we can make some use for the kingdom of God. It is all the more sure to arise because evil is strong enough to cause great trouble and suffering to those who refuse to transact with it. Hence people will ask whether there is no way in which we can take the loan of it, so to speak, in God's service - no method by which we can for the moment recognize it, yet avail ourselves of its recognition to secure its defeat - no philosophy or practical skill which will enable us to trade on its capital and to make our own or God's profit. This is the place at which subtlety may deceive us, but simplicity never will. Go to the bottom, as a simple mind instinctively does, and all this philosophizing and negotiating with evil is worshipping the Devil. That is not what it is called, but that is what it is. And it is as vain as it is wicked. No one ever makes anything by it. The Devil is an egoist, and will not do any man a good turn for God's sake. If anyone wishes to work for the kingdom of God, there is only one possible attitude to evil, however plausible and powerful - the attitude of simple outright defiance, which owes allegiance to God alone.

This truth has to be applied in various ways, and will hardly be applied without giving offence. There may be a bad man in the Church's environment, who has nevertheless great social influence: is it not fair enough to get his financial or his social support even for the cause which his life discredits? May we not get his patronage for the church fair, and get good of it, even though it is given not without indifference or contempt? The answer of the Gospel is quite un equivocal: to accept such patronage is to fall down and worship the Devil, and that is not the way the kingdom of God comes. Or there may be a bad institution in our environment: the liquor interest, or a corrupt interest in municipal or national politics. Do not alienate so powerful a section of society, we are sure to be told, by declaring the mind of Christ about their trade or their conduct. Recognize their right to exist, and they will recognize yours. You will do more good in the long run by acknowledging facts than by knocking your head against a wall. Certainly there is nothing more to be desired than that facts should be acknowledged; but the final fact which we are here summoned by our Lord to recognize is the fact that with evil He can make no compromise whatever; and as for knocking our heads against walls, how would those who are so quick to use such language describe the way in which He came by His death? Even in things less doubtful we have to take care that we do not ally the Church with what is alien to it, and especially that we do not count on that alliance for its strength. There are plenty of people who avow that they have little faith in Christianity except as it has entered into alliance with the spirit of a nation, and is embodied in a state church; it is its political prestige which gives it its standing ground, and enables it to discharge its function in the national life. This is precisely what the Gospel here condemns. The spirit of a nation, as we are well aware, is capable of pride and selfishness, of violence and inhumanity; and the strength of the spiritual can never be derived from so ambiguous a relation. The Church exists, not to be quickened by the spirit of any nation, however great, but to embody the wider and greater spirit of humanity, nay the very spirit of God. It is always being tempted to seek the alliance and patronage of things lower than itself - of the things that have power in this world: wealth, rank, social distinction, political status. And in all such cases, it is the lower which bribes the higher and takes advantage of it; we fall down and for the vain help He promises worship the Prince of this world, forgetting that He alone can be our help Who claims our undivided allegiance for Himself.

Such were the temptations of the Son of God which He anticipated and vanquished in the opening of His career: such still are the temptations of His Church, and of all who as sons of God are workers together with Him. That is why we think and speak of them still. When they come upon us, let us set the Lord always before us: not despairing of God in trial, nor promising ourselves and others that physical trials will cease; not presuming on God, nor trying by hypnotizing men's senses to win their spirits for Him; not shutting our eyes to the power of evil in the world, but, conscious of the sovereign power of God, bidding it defiance in His name. It is as we follow Jesus thus that we shall become partakers not only in His tribulation and in His patience but also in His kingdom.