



The devil in the desert

Rob Marsh SJ

Thinking Faith has led you into the desert this Lent, but Rob Marsh SJ wants to warn you to keep your eyes open on your wanderings through the wilderness. Jesus met Satan in the desert – what if the devil still waits there for us, and has tricked us into valuing ‘the absence and separation and aridity’ of the place where he dwells? Imagine C.S. Lewis’ demon Screwtape writing to his nephew and fellow tempter to advise him how to be effective in exactly this deceit...

My dear Puspocket,

About all the anxiety you are getting into with regard to your patient’s rather romantic desire ‘to make a serious effort this Lent’. As delicious as I find your disquiet I tell you to stop at once. Junior tempters always prefer the lazy sins and risk missing the savour of more mature transgressions. I know you would prefer her to be lax (like yourself) and sail through this unholy season with no more than a token abstention from chocolate. There are rewards to be gleaned there surely but they are paltry ones. Have you no ambition, nephew? In fact there’s the key: if your patient wants to take Lent seriously you should encourage her ambition, swell it up, force feed it and you’ll have some real sins to play with. I am aware such a strategy will stretch you beyond drip-feeding her images of chocolate but those are childish temptations with only childish transgressions as reward. If you want truly adult sinning from her then tempt her with the idea of ‘the desert’. She wants to make a ‘serious effort’ so give her a serious goal, something she’ll have to strain for, something she can feel pride from merely considering. Forty days in the desert is ideal. It will let her feel she is following in the Enemy’s own peculiar footsteps but with a little care she won’t spend much time thinking about Him at all. Let her enjoy the romance of being stripped back to basics. Let her relish the stark desert light revealing what really matters. Give her twisted longings for loneliness of heart. Promise her that the Enemy will be found in hidden places. Yes, inflate her



high (and almost worthy) ideals; sow the seeds of ambition and we will reap a harvest of delicious pride.

Your affectionate uncle
SCREWTAPE
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My dear Puspocket,

Calm down nephew. Were you expecting such a quick payoff of pride in your patient? What do they teach you at the Academy these days? You have fed her dreams of the desert and now she is experiencing its aridity and discovering she doesn’t much like it. What you have instead of pride is discontent. You have two courses of action. You can encourage her disillusionment and desolation. Help her feel she needs to ‘get to the bottom’ of what she is undergoing. That should keep her running in circles for a week or two. With luck she will bypass you and blame Him for her misery. Be skilful enough (one can hope!) and she will never treat Lent seriously again. You might even be able to dissuade her from spiritual things altogether for a while—psychology is a safe bet instead.

The danger with those tactics is, dear nephew, that, if you are not as skilful as you boast you are, she may get dangerously close to genuine humiliation from which the Enemy often conjures genuine Humility by some underhand means we barely understand. That’s why I’d advise instead you mimic the agents of Heaven and tempt her to the ‘Bad’ under the guise of

'Good'. For example, whisper into her ear some sweet lies about the elevated nature of her aridity. Don't let her mind go near the suggestion that her dryness may be the natural fruit of looking in the wrong place. No, let her think that the dryness is a special mark of 'maturity', a sign of her 'progress'. Let her strive for what she truly dislikes. Then sit back and enjoy the taste of confusion. With any luck the Enemy won't be spared a thought in the process.

Your affectionate uncle
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My dear idiot Puspocket,

When I talked about getting her to relish her experience of dryness and even take pride in it I had no idea you would feed her the writings of hell-forsaken mystics who have genuinely been led by the Enemy into His particular disgusting brand of 'union'. Get her away from such material immediately. There are plenty of derivative works that have the High Command's stamp of approval and are guaranteed to be unhelpful to your patient. You are not the first to have committed such blunders – though whether that should gain you leniency we will have to see – and so certified countermeasures have been deployed for centuries.

The first such measure appeals to the humans' ever-available pride. Tell them that anything is on a scale of progress – stages is a good word to use – and two things are immediately possible even though they might seem contradictory. Humans will invariably judge themselves along this spurious scale either favourably placing themselves on its higher reaches or bemoaning their imagined failure to achieve. Either will do! Both have the fragrant possibility of pride. There are plenty of books for your patient to read – and yes nephew I know there are online resources too and all the more effective they are for being crude in their brevity; there are plenty of ways to have her interpreting her own dryness as the fabled well running dry when in fact she has barely ever sipped the water in the first place.

That is the second masterstroke of our Resistance efforts. We have planted a particularly pernicious scale of progress, a way of ranking their prayer in stages of all things! The genius is that we now have them believing that the more they pray the harder and more unpleasant it should get. Of course we hold out an ultimate stage of some imagined bliss but even this we mystify with paradox.

You and I know only too well and too painfully as field operatives how the evidence of the Enemy is everywhere and how searing to our eyes it is. It hurts all the time. And yet we are not permitted to see for ourselves what these filthy humans in all their squalor get to see: the Enemy's very Self ready and available at any excuse and every slightest invitation. We can only guess His motives for such profligacy and lack of Self-esteem. What they see as light burns our vision, what they hear we are deaf to, what is sweet to them is bitter tears to us. He promises them – gives them – his presence at every turn and we know full well it is a trap and a confidence trick. It must be.

So, yes, a scale of prayer. We have taught them to mistrust the presence of the Enemy which they were created to enjoy and instead to value more highly the absence and separation and aridity which is our own chosen lot. And to feel pride in their folly!

Your affectionate uncle
SCREWTAPE
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My dear Puspocket,

Must you be so literal? Of course esteeming dryness is not the only inversion we have embedded in their spirituality. The same dynamic is at work in many ways. They don't all literally describe the desert but the analogy is clear.

Take Silence. The one thing we know is that the Enemy speaks to the humans all the time. He never shuts up. We only have the rumours of what he actually says but the constant hubbub of communications

is always under analysis and one day we will decrypt more than the present fragments. We have spread the ridiculous idea that to hear the Enemy humans have to seek silence. We have even got them systematically to suppress the Enemy's voice so as to experience the inner stillness we have convinced them is necessary to be able to hear. The irony is delicious. We get fat off it.

Or take Darkness. Or since you are being so literal and the desert is only dark half the time, let's call it Obscurity. We have planted the idea that anything the humans see of the Enemy is not to be trusted. We have taught them that the Enemy lives in obscurity, beyond images, beyond names, beyond conception and that all the ways the Enemy actually shows Himself are probably fantasies. We have taught them to distrust their own imaginations. Another fine corollary is that they now equate this supposed obscurity of the Enemy to His wilfully hiding His Self, deliberately not trusting them to see or draw close. This carries over into intellectual obscurity too. The Enemy is too big for your minds we have taught

them, too complex for words to capture, so better not to try to grasp Him at all. We have made the Enemy into a Void and taught the humans to take pride in not hearing, not seeing, and not knowing Him.

Forgive me, nephew, I get carried away by the insane beauty of our corruption of the awful Truth. Train your patient well and she will feel noble not to be taken in when the Enemy speaks to her, she will feel proud to not be misled when the Enemy appears to her. And Lent is a perfect time to start. Teach her the delights of the desert where Our Father Below is so at home.

Your affectionate uncle
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