

Three Temptations

First Sunday in Lent

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As is the custom, our first Sunday in Lent has as its Gospel readings, the story of the temptation of Jesus. This year, we hear this story from Luke's account. When we open up Scripture and read it, one useful tool is to ask questions as we read or listen to it. Given our Anglican understanding that Scripture contains all things necessary for salvation, one valid question to ask is "WHY" Why has this been written and recorded for us to read? What makes this passage important. In the case of the Gospels, which we understand that the material we have is a selection or an excerpt from the life of Jesus, for John himself notes that to write down all that Jesus said and did would fill many books, then it is safe to assume that what was recorded was what was important.

To ask the question why was this recorded, is part of engaging in the process of redaction criticism. This process is about helping us to ascertain what is important. So why do we have this story of the temptation of Jesus in the gospel and why is important to our faith.

The story of Jesus' temptation, comes in the Gospel accounts immediately following his Baptism, and takes place in the Wilderness. After his baptism, and before beginning his ministry, Jesus goes into the wilderness, to commune with God and himself. Perhaps it is worth a foot note here that wilderness is desert and not the lush green places of our Tasmanian Wilderness. It is a place of emptiness and desolation. It is seemingly lifeless and godless and yet it is to this world that generation after generation of Christians have retired to spiritual growth. Somehow the natural focus is on the inner self, the inner life. Somehow the harsh desert light seems to put everything into a different perspective.

So from our context, we understand that this story is about Jesus and his ministry; that ministry which we now know was to lead to his death on the Cross. That ministry which would ultimately lead to the liberation of those captive to sin and under Satan's power. That ministry that would bring about the kingdom of God.

It was here as he contemplated his future path, his future ministry, that Jesus was to encounter the devil in all his wiles. Jesus knew his destiny and that he would rule the nations and usher in the kingdom of God, but that this would come at a price, a ransom, that price was the cross itself. These three temptations are about diverting Jesus from his mission. The devil came and tempted him to find the easier way, a less costly way. He tried to divert him from the path that he would walk, to gain the prize without the cross.

Jesus would achieve what he set out to do, to rule the nations, but Jesus would not defeat Satan. The devil would remain in control and humanity would remain under the penalty of sin.

Each of these three temptations, asks Jesus to use his superhuman power to obtain followers rather than just following the path of the cross.

Jesus was asked to prove himself by

- turning stones into bread
- submitting to the devil himself.
- leaping from the temple.

These are symbolic of the three other paths that he could choose:

To make bread from stones was to gain the loyalty of his followers because of what he could give them, by meeting their physical needs.

To leap from the temple pinnacle would gain followers by what Jesus could do, the spectacular miracle, the demonstration of divine power.

To bow to the devil, was to use the political system to manipulate and control. The followers would follow as part of the political machine, part of the revolution. Being bound to the devil (because of sin), they would have to give loyalty to whom he chose, to his agent.

In each way, Jesus would draw followers but this would be without the Cross, and Satan could remain in control.

Well before we move to look at how to apply this text to ourselves, just a couple of other points that ought to be made.

First of all, we must be careful to note that this was not the only time he was tested. John's Gospel tells us after the feeding of 5,000, many would see him made king. But for the wrong reasons. They wanted him to rule because he could feed them. His followers saw him as a potential leader of the army that could overthrow the ruling romans. Similarly, he was often challenged to demonstrate his divinity by performing a miracle on request, on demand in order that the onlookers might believe.

Also it is interesting to note that in the first temptation, Jesus was challenged to use his divine powers for himself. In the second, he was asked to do what was the opposite to his intended activity and in the third, scripture was used, or rather misused to tempt him.

Jesus also faced the temptations, with a clear understanding of scripture, countering with the word of life. Countering with his understanding of God's great plan contained within.

Finally, we should note that the end result of temptation resisted was strength. Temptation is part of being human. It is part of the divine free choice. We can only be tempted if we can choose to do wrong. It is what make us human, the ability to choose right from wrong.

But this story is not just an interesting anecdote in the life of Jesus. It is part of the living word - holy scripture, which still speaks today, that we might read, mark , learn and inwardly digest its message.

It is not only about the temptations tried against Jesus, but the everyday temptations that we face as we are his Body in the world. We may be tempted to preach a cross-less faith, to obtain followers, and indeed to follow ourselves in the easy way.

We may be tempted to use the message about what you can get, (or what you may avoid) if you follow Christ. We have all heard a preacher or an evangelist say: Come forward or rot in hell. (Usually, the message is a little more subtle). And we can respond to that kind of message with fear and with the motive of what is in it for me!!!

Or we may seek to use political structures to bring about the kingdom. History is littered with examples of the conversion of the nation with the conversion of the king or the conquering by the Christian power. The church is the establishment and the establishment the church, and we belong because to not belong is treason!!!

Or third, we can place our faith in demonstrations of Power. The miracle ministry where we see an active God and place our faith in the experience. We have all heard the testimony of those who follow because of the miracle, but those who remember the story of Joni Erickson Tada, will remember that the challenge for her was to believe when the miracle did not come. Faith is in believing what we don't see!!!

The temptations also act as a warning to us that we might not play our part in the establishment of the Kingdom. We want people to follow our Lord because of who he is, and not because of what he can do, or because of his divine power, or because we are structurally compelled.

As we prepare our strategies to reach out to our region, we must take care that we are not tempted to take the easy way. One thing that sticks in my mind from the WEC College was a quote from C.T. Studd - If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then there is no greater sacrifice that I can make.

AMEN