

Sermon: LENT 1, February 14, 2016

In the Name...

A priest woke up early one exceptionally beautiful and sunny Sunday morning and couldn't resist the temptation to play golf. So, he phoned his curate, pretended he was ill, then rushed off to the course. Well, St. Peter saw this and said to the Lord, "You're not going to let him get away with this, are you?" The Lord said, "No, I guess not." Well, the priest got to the first tee, hit the ball and it shot straight towards the pin, dropped just short of it, and rolled into the hole. Astonished, the priest went to the next tee and the same thing happened, in fact he hit eighteen hole-in-ones and was leaping about cheering that this was the happiest day of his life. St. Peter then looked at the Lord and asked, "Why did you let him do that?" The Lord smiled and replied, "And, who's he going to tell?"

Ah, temptation. Each person has their own. We all have different tastes, interests, lifestyles. What tempts some people is nothing I need to worry about and vice versa. So, when I read today's Gospel, I have to ask, why should I care about Jesus' temptations? I mean, it's not a sin to eat bread if I'm hungry and yeah, it would be great to be king, but, nobody's offering me that. And, I know for sure God isn't going to suspend the law of gravity to protect me from being stupid. So, I have to wonder, why do I need to hear about these? They don't interest me in the least.

Of course, maybe I'm being too literal. Let's see if there's something behind them which has a more universal application. And, so, to the first. It begins with the challenge, "Turn these stones into bread." Well, when you think about it, the temptation isn't to work a miracle. It's to satisfy a craving. Jesus had been without food for some time. He was in no small discomfort. So, Satan suggests, why wait? Why deny yourself? You're entitled. You're the Son of God. Do something useful with all these rocks.

Instant gratification is always enticing, isn't it? We want everything yesterday! One of the most difficult challenges we face in life is waiting. Remember all those times when we were told to wait. Wait before you can go to the playground by yourself. Wait until after dinner. Wait until you're 16. Wait until you're married. Wait until you've finished school. Wait until you can afford it. Wait...Wait...Wait... We get tired of it. We get impatient. So, we satisfy our hunger for whatever it is we want, now.

And, it's easy to do. Did you realize that, even in today's economy, the average person has four credit cards? And, it's not just about money or possessions. Lack of self-control leads to all kinds of problems - addictions, sicknesses, lies, you name it.

So, it looks like this temptation of Jesus really does have something to do with me, after all. It's not about bread. It's about patience and it's about greed. It's about self-indulgence. Here's the question. What is it that we don't want to wait for? Whatever it is, whatever those are, those are our temptations.

The second thing Satan presents to Jesus is the temptation to rule the world. Again, an example of something deeper. When I lived in Wales, my church was right next to the ruins of a mediaeval castle. Castles were originally built to protect people. They began as places of refuge, safety. They served a defensive purpose, but, they soon became centres of power, domination, control. The guy with the biggest castle became the king.

The desire to protect can all too easily become a desire to control. It's behind all dictatorship, left wing or right wing. It's the belief that people can't make the right decisions and shouldn't, therefore, be allowed to make any decisions. And, it's not just true of governments. Every parent knows the struggle of giving their child the freedom to make choices and take risks. Every manager knows how easy it is to start micro-managing and fault-finding. We divide the world into them and me and seek to control them, to restrict them, to make them do what me wants.

So, what castles do we build? Using the excuse of security, at home or work or in society, what crimes are we willing to commit or approve? Who are we willing to exclude or step on?

And the final temptation has a subtle appeal that we often miss. In a vision, Jesus finds himself standing on a pinnacle of the temple and Satan quotes from the Psalms, "He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone". Behind this pious wordplay is the suggestion that Jesus shouldn't have to suffer pain and he should refuse to do so.

And, why not? No one enjoys pain. Any sane person wants to avoid it. Yet, we've become a society obsessed with avoiding it at all costs. We enjoy the world's finest medical research and care dedicated to relieving pain, and there's nothing wrong with that, but, a side-effect (as they say in the ads) is that we've come to think that pain is unnatural, that suffering is not supposed to be part of the human experience.

The problem is that it is. Pain is part of Nature. God created us to live above, superior to, the laws of nature. That was our state in Eden. But, we rebelled. We wouldn't wait. We wanted to control our own lives. So, we moved out of the house, so to speak. And, that's why we find ourselves living in a world of physical pain - of sprained ankles and cancer - and in a world of spiritual pain - of guilt and bad decisions.

So, we seek ways to deny them both. We take pills; we justify our actions. We blame others for our sicknesses or our mistakes. It's not my fault. Phillip-Morris gave me cancer. Twinkies made me kill that person. But, the temptation to deny the existence of physical and spiritual pain is also the temptation to deny Jesus. Jesus can only be the Saviour to those who want to be saved from something; to those who are in pain. But, how often do we seek temporary relief of our own making without a permanent cure from God? How do we seek to be pain-free, guilt-free, Jesus-free?

Temptations are always with us and they don't disappear with wishful thinking. It's so ironic, we tell our teenagers to "Just Say No" to drugs, but, so often we just say "Yes" to everything else. We don't want to give up our lifestyles. We don't want to give up our pleasures. We resist

change even when we know it's good for us. We're like that man who was told by his doctor that the best thing he could do to avoid a fatal heart attack would be to change his diet. The man thought for a moment and asked, "Oh, so what's the next best thing?"

Lent is an opportunity, a time to examine ourselves; to name the hungers which tempt us and pull us away from God - the hunger for the now, the hunger for control, the hunger for pain killers - and, having named them, do something about them. Jesus had his. I have mine. I guess they're not all that different, after all. The good news is that the way to handle them isn't all that different, either, and helping me find out how is one desire I know God will be happy to grant.

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