

“Testing, testing” – Mat 4:1-11 – Lent 1 – Feb 10/08

“If Jesus was so powerful, why did he live like an ordinary person?” It’s a shocking question, isn’t it? But it seems to be the question that Matthew (and two other gospel authors) were dealing with. “If Jesus was the favourite son of God, why didn’t he just snap his fingers and rule the whole world?” These are not trivial questions, because the implication seems clear – that if Jesus didn’t use his power to get rich, to be treated specially, to grasp hold of all political power, then he didn’t have the power that should accrue from being the favoured son of God.

Based on how the world usually thinks, it seems a reasonable question. After all, wouldn’t anyone with that kind of power use it for personal gain? If you knew how to run the world properly, and had the power to do so, wouldn’t you step up and take the reins? If not, then you’re a whole lot different than the “leaders” we are blessed with today (and as Martha would say, “that’s a good thing!”).

Few of us could or would challenge the argument that the world works on power. The “golden rule” commonly means “those who have the gold (or oil, or ...) make the rules.” Our corporate structures, our political structures, even our social structures display the truth that power obtained is power wielded. Of course it is always justified in self-aggrandizing terms – “the cream always rises.” Mind you, one could cynically comment that it all seems to be a case of the Peter Principle taken to extremes – perhaps you remember the Peter Principle from Peter Drucker, who coined the concept that “people rise to the level of their incompetence.”

In any event, the common view of the world is that power is all-important, and if you can’t see a person having power then they don’t have any. This view hasn’t changed from Jesus’ day and is still as pervasive as ever. Sadly, the same view is pervasive in the Christian faith as well. “If I’m a Christian, and thus favoured by God, how is it that I’m not rich/powerful/beautiful/pain-free/without troubles/...?” If God loves me, and promises to bless me if I do all the right things, won’t I get that new car/new job/new girlfriend/new boyfriend/raise/lottery win/...?”

This pervasive world view of what it means to have power provides a powerful reason for this fascinating description of the temptation of Jesus. The gospel authors wanted their readers to clearly understand that Jesus’ refusal to surrender to the temptations of power was a sign of true power, not a weakness. It is clear that with more power comes more temptation, and with the power of God at hand Jesus is clearly tempted with lures corresponding to that power.

That’s what’s at heart in our reading from Matthew’s gospel, about the attempts to tempt Jesus, and his success at not yielding. “Then Jesus, returned from the Jordan, was led ...” it starts off, and isn’t that always the way? Temptations seem to come the strongest just as things begin to go well. When a new career seems established, when finally one’s financial situation seems to be positive for the first time, just when a relationship becomes comfortable, that’s when temptation rears its ugly head, and so we can recognize Jesus’ situation. Here he is, right at the beginning of his ministry, and the first significant thing that happens is quick series of devilish challenges! Right when he was the most vulnerable, before he even had a chance to catch his footing, or get his bearings, or however you want to express it, right then, first off, it’s “testing, testing, 1-2-3”. Looking for any chinks in his armour, or weak spots, that personification of evil called the tempter, the devil, Satan, probed to see if Jesus would be caught off guard, would be puffed up with his newly-declared status as Son of God and fall prey to those dangerous invitations.

And so, right while he was the most vulnerable, Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness and presented with temptations, to which Jesus’ answers were consistent. Each time Jesus responds to the temptation with a quotation from scripture, specifically from Deuteronomy, with echoes of the shema ringing in the background. [The shema, from the opening Hebrew word “hear”, is

that central tenet of Old Testament faith, which declares “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”] One after another in rapid succession the attacks come, tempting Jesus to divert either body, soul, or strength from honouring God. And one, two, three times Jesus asserts that he will resist the temptation, and heed the command, and love God with all that he was. Attacked in the fullness of who he was, Jesus overcame the temptations and was obedient not just here, but through to the cross of death, and beyond, so that we can echo and proclaim with St. Paul that Christ, although tempted like us, was in all ways blameless and pure.

Although we may never walk in the wilderness of Palestine, the settings for Jesus’ temptations should still remind us of the settings for our own as well. The first scene is the one we remember, the forty days and nights alone in the wilderness. So often our temptation experiences take place in the same kind of isolated aloneness, where we’re feeling underloved and undernourished, hungry for some satisfaction. I think one could draw a connection between the huge aloneness that people feel in North American society, even in the midst of overcrowding, and the ballooning health care problem of endemic obesity. Food is the simplest and most readily-available temptation to which people succumb, but it doesn’t stop there, as crystal meth makes all too painfully clear – there is an evil temptation that once yielded to, provides a devilish hook that is almost impossible to remove.

But if food or drugs are the first temptation, the second, the drug of power over others is almost as bad. It is tragic enough to watch the self-destruction of someone who becomes so focused on whatever power their role in business, in politics, or even in the church gives them over other people that they fail to see the damage it is doing to them, but it is way more painful to watch the damage done to those trampled in the process. This lure of power over others is most appropriately presented to Jesus as the second temptation, for it is the Satanic backup plan for those who are strong enough to resist the simpler temptations, and for those who see themselves as strong. All of the kingdoms of the world are offered to Jesus, if he will just succumb to the temptation to worship the one who offers them to him, reminding us clearly that there is always a price to be paid for such power, and there is always someone waiting to collect.

And for those who are the strongest of the strong, who are able to rise above even the temptation of power over vast portions of the planet, there is the strongest temptation of all, the lure to see oneself as above all the people, god-like, no longer a mere mortal, one whom must be respected by even God, so precious that angels will be dispatched to provide a soft landing (or at the very least an aircraft carrier waiting a mile off the coast for just such a scene). Thank God that such self-centred individuals are relatively rare, and can occasionally be voted out of power.

Even, or especially in the heart of a major city, we live in a wilderness, a world where temptations swirl around us, offering endless opportunities for us to succumb. We try to resist, and to various degrees we are successful, but we are not perfect. When we fail we are not pleased with ourselves, and so especially during this time of Lent we pause, and reflect, and are sorry for (it’s too bad the word ‘penitent’ has gone out of style, for it means all of that) the times we have yielded to temptation and failed to live out our love for and of God. I don’t mean just the ‘simple’ temptations of food and trinkets (most of us can handle those kinds of temptation, although I still can lose control in an online bookstore!), but we succumb to the more subtle and more dangerous kinds; the temptations to behave in ways that cause hurt, or despair, or people to turn away from God. Temptations that cause us to turn away from God, and to focus upon ourselves; to turn service into “serve-us”. We are frail and fragile creatures, and we are not perfect, and do yield to temptations from time to time.

What grace then that we have a saviour in Christ Jesus who did demonstrate a perfect power to resist temptation, and who did serve in perfect obedience unto death to atone for our weaknesses and sins. What a divine blessing that in Christ our failures, and weaknesses, and yieldings are forgiven. Not that this gives us license or permission to rush headlong into the next batch of temptations with glee and abandon, for each one of our failures and sins is another burden upon our Lord, but that with deep joy, and thankfulness, and peace we can acknowledge that in spite of our weaknesses and faults and failures we will be presented spotless before the Lord our God through Christ's redeeming power. What mercy, what love we have been shown by God in Jesus of Nazareth, of whom God himself declared "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him"

What mercy, what amazing grace we have been given in being cleansed by that same Son of God who died on the cross that we might have life eternal, sustained and guided to safety by the power of the same Holy Spirit that uplifted Jesus in the wilderness. As we enter into the season of Lent, this 40-day period of self-reflection and penitence, let us echo his words, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."