

“The Sin of Entitlement” – Luke 4:1-13 – Lent 1 – Feb 17/13

If you’ve been watching Canadian political news lately you’ll have noticed that a few of our Senators are under investigation. In addition to Sen. Patrick Brazeau, whom the Senate recently voted into a leave of absence, investigators are digging into the financial records of several other Senators to check on allegations of improper if not illegal billing for compensation. Underneath it all seems to be an attitude of entitlement, a culture of belief that they are owed various perks even if they are not really qualified to receive them.

Sadly, however, we can hardly point a judgmental finger at the Senate alone, for if these allegations are true then I suspect they have merely fallen victim to a cultural phenomenon that is becoming more and more prevalent in our society today. That phenomenon is an ever-increasing sense of entitlement, a belief that somehow the world, or life, or society, or all three owe me, that I am entitled to whatever I want. No criteria, no prerequisite of having earned it, just that somebody should give me whatever I want just because I want it. Whether cheating with drugs in the sports world, or filing false claims in the financial world, or extracting outrageous salaries and benefits in the corporate world, it seems that there is no part of our society that is immune to this growing decline in ethics and morals.

It would be easy to see this attitude as a result of recent moves in both parenting and our education system, or even a natural progression of the Age of Enlightenment over the past three or four hundred years; to understand it as a predictable movement from the initial stages of declaring individual freedom from systemic oppression to a situation of the license of individual freedom blotting out any civic or civil responsibility. It would be – and is – easy to see that, but however true that may be there is more to the story than just the past three or four hundred years.

For example, it is clear that the propensity of people to let their sense of entitlement overrule their sense of ethics is as old as human society. In the opening pages of the Old Testament the question of why God’s perfect creation seems less than perfect is addressed in an essay that reveals the answer lies with our human obsession of being entitled – to knowledge, and to power. Throughout the historical era of the Old Testament we witness how kingdom after kingdom rises until the sense of self-entitlement results in an abandonment of God and God’s call to mercy and justice, and the kingdom crumbles. Time and time again the prophets of the Israelite faith carry the word of God to the people that their self-interests and sense of entitlement have led them astray and away from God.

And here in our first gospel reading of the Season of Lent we have the classic confrontation of Jesus with the lures of temptation, fueled with invitations to succumb to a sense of entitlement. That’s what’s at heart in our reading from Luke’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 are going well. Just when a new career seems established, when finally one’s financial situation seems to be going well for the first time, just when a relationship becomes comfortable, that’s when temptation rears its ugly head, and we can so recognize Jesus’ situation.

Here Jesus is, right at the beginning of his ministry, fresh from the affirmation from God, surrounded by an adoring crowd of disciples and crowds, 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, Jesus is drawn into the “trying times.” 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 all targeting any sense of entitlement he might have felt. Bread from stones; the power over earthly kingdoms; even the power to force God to act, these lures to entitlement are offered one by one. But 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 in these trying times, 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.

Even though 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 in the wilderness. Of course the ‘forty’ helps, as it immediately brings to mind the forty days and nights that Moses wandered in the wilderness, or the forty years the Israelites wandered in the desert on their long trek to the promised land. Jesus became hungry (I guess so!) and was tempted with the most basic of desires, to satisfy the body. 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. Food is the simplest and most readily-available physical satisfaction but sex and drugs follow closely.

But if food, sex, or drugs are the first temptation, the second, the drug of power over others is almost as bad. Watching someone self-destruct through focusing on whatever power their role in business, in politics, or even in the church gives them over other people is painful; even more painful is 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. Thank God that such self-centered individuals are relatively rare, and can occasionally be voted out of power, although all too often it takes the deaths of hundreds or even hundreds of thousands to bring them down.

It's interesting that Luke, in his account of this testing period, makes no mention of angels as both Matthew and Mark do; stranger yet when you realize that Luke is comfortable with angels, being the one who shows us the angels present at Jesus' birth, bringing the news to the shepherds. Luke prefers instead to emphasise how Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit, and I find that comforting. Not many of us, especially in times of temptation and failure have the opportunity to see angels on the bedposts, but all of us can draw upon the promise of the Holy Spirit helping us to gain victory.

Oddly enough, even here in the heart of a major city we also 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 or in West Marine!), 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 we should 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. Let us echo his words, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."