

“Which Power To Follow?” – Mat 4:1-11 – Lent 1 – Mar 5, 2017

“If Jesus was so powerful, why did he live like an ordinary person?” Yes, I know, that’s a shocking question, isn’t it? But that seems to be a very specific question with which Matthew (and two other gospel authors) were dealing. “If Jesus was the favourite son of God, why didn’t he just snap his fingers and rule the whole world – or at least fix it?” is another variation of the same question. And again, “If Jesus was so powerful, why did he die?” While perhaps offensive or at least upsetting, these are not trivial questions, both because the implications could be disturbing but also because many people still ask them today. The logic seems to be 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 after all have the power that one would expect from the favoured son of God.

Based on how the world usually thinks, these seem to be reasonable questions. After all, wouldn’t anyone with that kind of power use it for personal gain? If you believed you knew how to run the world properly, and had the power to do so, wouldn’t you step up and take over? If not, then you’re a whole lot different than some of the politicians and other leaders we are “blessed” with today.

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 and (gasp!) church structures display the truth that power obtained is power wielded. Of course it is always justified in self-aggrandizing terms – for example, “the cream always rises.” Recent events especially in Syria and the Ukraine remind us that those in power will often go to revolting extremes to hang on to their power.

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 we see the same view in many places and in many people 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 motivation for the gospel authors to present 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 sign of weakness. Our experience is that with more power comes more temptation (if you disagree I would point you to the endless stream of examples flooding out of Washington – or Ottawa – or Victoria – or Vancouver – these days!). It follows that with the power of God in his grasp Jesus would clearly be tempted with lures corresponding to that power.

Temptation following power is the focus in our reading from Matthew’s gospel, about the attempts to tempt Jesus, but more so 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, just when we’re on the home stretch toward arriving into our new building, those are the precise times 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, just as his role is affirmed, that is when he is tested. Looking to use his newly proclaimed power as a lever, 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, underappreciated, and undernourished, hungry for some satisfaction. We can 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 today readily-available drugs, whether over-the-counter or from the street corner also provide a tempting lure for many.

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 entitled, 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. Sadly it seems in our western culture today that more and more people see themselves as entitled, that others should make way for them, that it is their God-given right to butt into line, or to stand in the intersection yakking on their cellphone, or to demand that they be served right now! Even worse, those who have real power in our political and economic systems see no problems with flaunting the laws of our land or grabbing obscene chunks of money and resources while ignoring those with few or none, all the while justifying their actions with thoughts of "I'm entitled to this!"

Although we don't live in the wilderness but in the heart of a major city, nevertheless temptations do indeed 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, our weaknesses, and our yielding 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."