

“Testing, testing” – Luke 4:1-13 – Lent 1 – Feb 29/04

Well, this season of Lent has certainly kicked off with a bang, hasn't it? No, I'm not referring to the gentle and moving service we had here Ash Wednesday evening, but instead to the controversy and flap surrounding the Ash Wednesday release of Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion of the Christ". What a flurry and a foo-rah! I haven't seen the movie, but I have read and enjoyed the book, so I probably won't go see it.

While I have almost no fascination for the movie itself, I am intrigued and delighted by the peculiar alignments happening in the surging voices endorsing or decrying the movie. Who would have believed it possible that there could have been such a solid alliance between pre-Vatican-II Roman Catholics and 21st Century Pentecostals?? I'm utterly astounded! I'm also a bit upset at the damage done to four centuries of solid biblical scholarship by a rampant conflation of the gospels, but we'll see how that all develops.

However, there are some positives in all of this flap. The release of a gory movie filled with enough good-old-fashioned Roman Catholic guilt that would make even a staunch Calvinist proud has provided enough of a public draw to attract the attention of a portion of the public, and presumably at least turned some peoples' thoughts to reflections appropriate to Lent. Lent, of course, is the 40-day season leading up to Good Friday during which we reflect upon our sins, and hopefully express our regrets about them, seek forgiveness, and ask for strength to avoid succumbing in the future.

People still observe some old traditions during Lent, the most common of which is (or at least used to be) the 'giving up' of something, as a form of penitence through self-denial. There's no denying, though, that the thought of giving something up for almost two months is frightening, and so there's a strong temptation to binge on whatever is being given up just before Lent starts. That, of course, is the origin of the parties and extravaganza celebrations of Mardi Gras, or "Big Tuesday" that immediately precedes Ash Wednesday. That pre-Lenten celebration started as a kind of pig-out before the long period of self-denial, but has now grown to be a major kind of festival in Latin America and New Orleans, a festival of celebration of temptations of the most human kind.

Not that any of us have to travel to New Orleans or Rio to find temptation. We don't even have to look that far abroad to see examples of yielding to temptation, for there are countless examples right around us. Whether it's trying to be clever by "jumping the queue" in either traffic or any other lineup, or in scamming millions through either corporate greed or political slush funds, there is no shortage of people to be seen failing to resist and falling prey to the temptation for the "easy grab".

Shucks, even here in this sermon I've already yielded to temptation – the temptation to talk only about people failing to meet the tests of temptation, because it's so easy to do, and so effective at capturing our interest. We love to see others fail at resisting temptation – indeed a whole new type of TV show has even been explicitly developed to exploit this desire. Temptation Island sure is a long way from Gilligan's! While we would claim that we are rooting for someone to successfully resist, the real lure is the lurid temptation to watch others fail the same way we do. After all, who really wants to hear about someone who unlike us is strong enough to successfully resist temptation?

Well, I guess we all do, when we stop to think about it. Although it's often a bit threatening to see such successes, especially when it's a friend who demonstrates a strength that we wish we had, there still is some comfort in knowing that at least someone can beat the urge, and just say 'no'.

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. 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 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". 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.

Use your imagination to drift into Jesus' experiences here, to get a sense of what he was encountering, and feeling. Imagine for a moment, if you will, that you, in the midst of being baptized, have just heard the voice of God clearly proclaim you as the Messiah, the Son of God. Your heart is pounding, your head is spinning. "This is too much! What is happening here? What am I supposed to do? I've got to get away to think, to process all of this!" If you had just been tapped on the shoulder, and given the task of being the saviour of the world, wouldn't you be a bit rocked by it all? To deny that Jesus felt any of that would be to deny that he was as human as any of us, needing time for some reflection, more than a bit awed at the responsibility, a bit giddy with the excitement, vulnerable to the temptation of the power.

And so, right while he was the most vulnerable, Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness. "Testing, testing," 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.

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, 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 the spectacular rise in the drug trade, and now especially crystal meth, makes all too painfully clear – and there is a 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.

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.

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 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."