

Lent 1 2020. 1st March 2020

Matthew 4:1-11

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The season of Lent is the beginning of a period of immersion in the paschal mystery – the dying and rising of Christ which is the heart of the Christian journey. It is a story of liberation which echoes the two great stories of liberation of the Jewish people – liberation from slavery in Egypt and return from Exile in Babylon.

So it seems useful to begin with the questions: **what are we being liberated from and what are we being liberated for?** This is a time of introspection. A time in the desert – an in between time – a time when we ask ourselves, with a particular, intensity – what has been the nature of our slavery and where and how is God leading us to freedom? Not just as individuals but also at the level of family, community, the human race and the planet.

The gospel of Luke puts these questions right up front – Jesus is baptised, and then BAM – the Spirit immediately takes him out into the desert for 40 days where he is tempted. To be led by God Jesus has to be disconnected from all that is familiar – away from family – away from the carpentry business – away from the synagogue. He has to get hungry – he has to be emptied out – the restless ego needs to settle sufficiently for the questions to emerge. What IS the nature of this vocation that the Abba – his heavenly Father – is calling him to?

After 40 days in the desert, the devil starts to stick the boot in....with three temptations. If Jesus falls for any of them, it's game-over for his vocation. It's going to be sunk before it begins.

First of all, the devil goes for the low-hanging fruit. This is an easy one. The 2nd and 3rd temptations which are going to be so crucially important are emerging out of hunger. They have come from deep prayer, from inner emptiness. So, strategically, the tempter tries to scuttle the project by alleviating the hunger which is giving rise to the questions. "Turn these stones into bread". In other words – get rid of the discomfort of hunger. If the devil can get Jesus to succumb to this temptation, the other two temptations won't be an issue – in fact, they won't even arise as questions. Anyone who has done Spiritual Direction knows that the learning comes out of the discomfort, not avoiding it.

But Jesus doesn't fall for it. He elects to stay with the project – listening for the Word of God.

So now, continuing to emerge out of his hunger for God, comes two more temptations. These temptations are closely related to each other – but speak in different contexts. When Jesus is crucified, what are the systems that get him crucified?

Religion and Empire. Jesus is crucified by religion and empire. I want to be very clear here about what I am NOT saying. I did NOT say, Jesus is crucified by Jews and Romans. I said, 'religion and empire'.

So I'm starting to return to the point I made before – what is the nature of the slavery to which humans are subject? We in Australia are not enslaved, literally, like the Jews were to the Egyptians. But there are forces at work which vie for the allegiance of the human soul.

St Paul variously had a name for these enslaving powers. He called them the powers of SIN and DEATH', and that these powers are very subtle. On the face of it, these powers mask themselves in

the perfectly reasonable every day processes of **law and goodness**, through which religions and empires stabilise themselves.

Empires stabilise themselves in large part through **law**. If we can create the rights laws, then we think we will have peace as a society. All we need to do is to throw the law-breakers into prison or ramp up the penalties and all will be well. Hence, we will notice, with 100% certainty, that as each election approaches both sides of politics will vie with each other for who will be toughest on crime and who will best protect our borders from external threat.

Religions, on the other hand, typically try to stabilise themselves through systems of **moral goodness**. This is the great trap for any of us who profess faith – to fall into the trap of thinking that Christianity is primarily about moral virtue. It isn't.

When you put religion and state together (one claiming moral virtue and the other with the coercive powers of the state) then that can be a lethal combination – and a VERY good reason to keep church and state at arms-length from each other. Because when a religious mob cries out for a lynching, and the state succumbs (or visa versa), then even Christ can be crucified, and with complete legal and moral self-justification. As the High Priest put it, to justify the disposal of Jesus, *'do you not know that is expedient that one man die for the sake of the nation'*. And as Pilate knew, a scapegoat is an effective piece of crowd control because it takes the crowd's attention off the politician.

So, returning to the temptations in the desert. The essential temptations being offered to Jesus are to align himself with empire and its laws (authority over all the kingdoms of the earth) and with religion and its intricate codes of moral goodness (to put himself at very top of the temple and be gracefully carried down on the arms or angels in front of adoring crowds).

The temptation to power; to influence; to control; to be right; to be holy, run strong in most of us, at some level. And these are the roots of human violence. Jesus rejects them all. His one, consistent, and only desire is to do the will of the Abba....which is love – which refuses to kill and would die rather than hate one's enemies.

The liberation which Jesus brings conquers no foreign lands – results in no hate for other races – and is utterly vulnerable to the hatred of the mob. Christ's first words in the resurrection are PEACE.... *'peace be with you – as the Father sent me, so I send you'*....

These temptations in the wilderness set the scene for the dynamic which will play out through the rest of the gospel – the dynamic wrestling between Gospel on one hand and culture (religion and empire) on the other. In the end, Jesus will be killed by the combined forces of religion and empire – of moral goodness and law. But he will be raised, transcend both, announce forgiveness to those who kill him and entrust his disciples with his liberation, forgiveness, reconciliation and peace.

As the risen Jesus says to his disciples after being raised from the dead, 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you'. The church is not a legal movement or a moral goodness movement – it exists only to be a movement of the Compassionate Spirit of Christ.