

First Sunday in Lent: 5 March 2017

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Matt.4.1).*

Here we stand at the beginning of Lent, at the start of our own forty-day fast, whatever form that takes for each of us. There seems to be a lot of confusion about the reason(s) we might have for observing a fast for these forty days leading up to Easter. The whole concept of fasting is victim of a lot of confusion in our culture generally, as it so easily becomes entangled with our ideas of dieting, losing weight and self-improvement. We tend to approach the Lenten fast like a New Year's resolution: think of all the vices that have crept into our lives lately and cut one of them out for forty days. If we do a really good job, maybe the chosen change can become a long-term healthy habit. And so we give up Facebook, chocolate, caffeine or alcohol – or a couple hours a week to attend a Bible study. And so we miss the point.

When Christ is led into the wilderness for forty days of fasting, it is not for self-improvement. To place today's reading in context, we need to think back a couple of months to when we observed The Baptism of Christ (in fact, we in Nova Scotia have to think back about 14 months, since this year, we were all being baptized in snow while the rest of the world was reading and reflecting on the baptism of Christ).

The point is that today's reading on Christ's temptation follows directly on Christ's baptism. Matthew's account ended thus: "And when Jesus had been

baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased'" (3.16-17). It is then that Jesus is "led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil" (4.1). Christ is not fasting for self-improvement. God has already acknowledged him as God's well-pleasing Son. He doesn't need to change a thing.

But he does have a mission to fulfill. And so it isn't enough for him to know who he is before God; he needs to come to terms with what that identity means for his life and work. And so the Spirit leads him into the wilderness, where he is stripped of everything but his identity, where he has nobody and nothing to rely on except the God who calls him to the difficult road ahead.

The temptations are not about questioning Christ's identity as God's Son, they are about testing Christ's willingness – as God's Son – to embrace fully the humanity he came to save. In the incarnation, Christ emptied himself, laid aside his divine power and authority in order to become human in every way, subject even to death. Now, having been acknowledged as God's Son, the temptation is to take up that power and authority again, even if only for a moment, to bring himself relief in a very difficult situation. He might even reason that his momentary self-interest would be for the good of those others he came to save.

The first test seems almost a no-brainer. What harm could it do to anyone to turn these stones into bread? Nobody would miss them. Nobody would even notice. But Christ came not for himself, but for the poor and hungry, the meek and mourning. How could he wield divine power for his own sake and still embrace these helpless ones in their powerlessness? He could not. And so he leaves the would-be bread alone.

Surprisingly, he has learned from his fasting that “One does not live by bread alone.” Of course, without bread – or food of some kind – one does not live either, not for very long. But going hungry has made clear that there is more to life than food. Were he to give in to this temptation to fill his belly with food, he would thereby forego the word of God that sustains him in his mission. Although going without food for much longer might kill him, taking this shortcut would mean abandoning his mission. It would be a fate worse than death.

Here, at the outset of Christ’s earthly mission, his earthly fate is already at play. If he didn’t know it at his baptism, he surely knows it by the time the last temptation comes around. He cannot make bread for himself from stones, because it is he himself who must become bread for others. He cannot claim divine intervention in a spectacular dive from the temple-spire, because that intervention would keep him from the cross as well. He cannot accept power over the kingdoms of the earth, because he first has to allow those kingdoms to overpower him. Taking what is rightfully his would be a disaster; only giving what is only his to give can fulfil his identity as God’s Son.

In sending Christ, God knew that the only way to save us would be to embrace humanity in all its weakness and vulnerability. Yet too often, our response is to try to save ourselves, to seek to escape our own humanity, to secure ourselves from hunger and poverty, to gain control over ourselves and others. After all, we reason, how can we help others if we ourselves are helpless? But the way of Christ is different. In the way of Christ, the question is: how can we help others unless we know our own helplessness?

In a Lenten fast, we have opportunity not so much for self-improvement, but for embracing our frail humanity, for remembering that we do not and should not have the control we long to exercise over our own lives and the lives of others. A Lenten fast provides an opportunity to forget about self-improvement, to forget about ourselves altogether (even if only momentarily). Our identity as God's children sets us free from self-absorbed self-improvement because it sets us, with Christ, on the hard road of self-denial and the cross, on the only road that leads to life. Christ himself has walked this road before us and for us, so when we fail to keep the fast – as we inevitably will – when we fail to embrace our own frail humanity, we still have hope in the one who embraces it for us.