

Lent I **February 21, 2010**

We always hear the story of the temptations on the first Sunday in Lent. Every year without fail. We always hear this story because the Church thinks it's something we need to deal with if we're going to take Lent seriously; if we're going to grasp the meaning and the possibilities for us of these forty days.

It's easy to be way too glib about how Lent and the temptations work together. We can end up imagining that Jesus gets baptized and runs into the desert to be tempted by the devil to do bad things; and Jesus doesn't do these bad things—so he passes the test and off he goes to begin his ministry. In the same way, during Lent we *create* bad things to do (breaking whatever Lenten rule we have set for ourselves) and if we don't do those bad things, or don't do too many of them, then we have had a good Lent and Easter should be more rewarding. Of course, when we put it this way, it does seem a bit puzzling, and a little silly.

So, what *is* going on with this story, and with Lent? Let's start with Jesus. At his Baptism, Jesus was told who he was, he was given his identity as the beloved son, with whom the father was well pleased. Now, an identity like this is not a piece of paper like a driver's license, that you carry around with you in case you are asked for an ID. An identity like this implies a way of life, a path to walk, if you're really going to live out who you are. Jesus knew this, he knew that accepting his identity as the beloved of the Father meant that he had chosen to walk the path of loving obedience *to* the Father. If he were the son of God, he would walk that path. Now, all the details of such a path are never clear until they're faced, but the direction and the focus of the path is clear.

So, hot from God's kiln at the river Jordan, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness—and he went there knowing who he was, and with a sense of the path such an identity set before him. Here we meet the central issue.

Think about this: the temptations of Jesus are best viewed, not as bad thing the devil wanted Jesus to do, but as alternative paths Jesus is invited to adopt as defining his life story. So the primary issue in the wilderness is not whether or not Jesus will do a bad thing or three. (In fact, not everything the devil asks Jesus to do in the wilderness *is* a bad thing in and of itself—he did something very much like turning stones into bread during the feedings of the multitude; and the bit with jumping off the Temple is certainly showing off, but it doesn't seem particularly immoral.) The primary issue in the wilderness is whether Jesus will stay on the path the Father has given him, or choose a different path.

The life that Jesus' identity gives him is a life where nothing ultimately defines him but God. It is a life that is ruled by the choice faithfully to follow the Father's word, and the path he offers. It's not a life ruled by Jesus' desires or by his ability to do tricks. Turning a stone into a loaf of bread because he was famished suggested a path of appetite and miracle, rather than the one truly set before him. If Jesus chose that path, he might get all the bread he wanted, but he would soon stray away from the Father, and the Father's call.

In the same way, Jesus, the beloved of the Father, was given a path that demanded that only the Father be worshiped or obeyed—no matter how attractive, useful, or just plain fun the other offers might be. Again, the real issue in the temptations offered Jesus was not, “Will you jump?”, or “will you worship?”, but “Will you walk a path other than your true path as the beloved son of God.”

So there is real irony in the way the devil begins his offers, “If you are the son of God...” then do this or do that. In fact, the real point was whether or not Jesus would act like the son of God in the midst of these alternatives. What Jesus did in the wilderness was not primarily to say “No” three times. What he mainly did was walk with steadfastness the one path that his identity opened for him.

That is what all real temptation is all about at its heart—it's not about being good or bad just this once—it's about being faithful to the path we have chosen—no matter what.

And remember, at our baptism we are named beloved children of God. We are given exactly the same identity Jesus was given. And that means we are given his path to walk. This is the path of obedience to the Father; it is the path where, in the long run, nothing defines our life except God. Of course, it's not a path that involves doing all the same things that Jesus did. But it is, none the less, the very same path.

I suspect that the reason Lent always begins with the story of Jesus' temptations is that Lent is about reminding us to look carefully, not only at our particular actions and inactions, but also and especially at *the path we are in fact walking*, that we are *in fact* living out day by day. What does our behavior reveal about the direction we have chosen?

I'm convinced that this is the right question, rather than the question, "Is this or that the right thing to do." After all, we can be good, we can follow all of the rules, but (for example) if we do this in order to feel superior to other folks, or so we can be proud of ourselves, or because we are afraid not to, or so others will think us righteous, then, good behavior or not, we are deeply on the wrong path; we are not on the path of a child of God.

Lent can help us realize this; it can help us look at our temptations, and learn from them whether and how we need to change directions to be on the path that is right for a beloved child of God.

That's what repentance is really about, it is about changing directions, turning around, walking another path. It's not about being sorry. I've said this before and I'll doubtless say it again, but listen: if you want to go to Dallas and you get on the Interstate going West, then you *are not* going to get to Dallas, no matter how many times you pull over to the side, stop, get out of the car, and apologize. That path will take you somewhere else.

The question of Lent, and especially of Jesus' temptations, is a simple one—what path are we on?