

AN INVITATION TO ANOTHER LENT

I'm wondering whether our young people know about temptation or whether they think it's only about consequences. The word temptation has fallen into disuse I suspect. Maybe the word FAITH is in the same state. I mean, who needs faith? I guess in 2016 we would all agree that we need to be able to TRUST – but faith is probably going a bit too far for most. This is not cynicism but rather a reaction to media portrayals.

So, we're on the road to Holy Week and Easter. Our journey today begins with a thanksgiving ceremony in which the Israelis commemorated the generosity of God who 'brought them out of Egypt' into a land 'flowing with milk and honey.' They recall God's faithfulness during their journey to freedom.

Jesus, too, enters the desert to find freedom, but ironically must reject the very blessings – food, new land and protection – that God gave his forbears during their time in the desert. The difference is not in the blessings themselves but in WHO is offering them and at what price. All of the devil's offerings come with strings attached – that Jesus worship the devil, that he uses the gifts for himself and his own satisfaction thus making the gifts ends in themselves instead of instruments of a new quality of life for everyone. The blessings that God bestowed upon the Israelites were freely given so that they would discard their false idols and trust in the freedom promised by God.

Jesus would have participated in the ritual of remembrance at least 30 times before he stood on the edge of his own wilderness. Jesus had just heard himself called the Lamb of God by John the Baptizer. It is he who will carry the sins of the people. Surely to reflect on this startling revelation, we are not surprised that the Spirit leads Jesus to a place where he can think and listen and pray. He entered the lonely time of temptation confident of the God who is shelter and refuge, protection and deliverance. Famished after 40 days without food, Jesus refused the invitation to satisfy his need with acts of magic. On the verge of his own ministry, Jesus rejected the offer of easy glory and power. About to reveal to the world his true identity, he refused to force God's hand. He rejected the showy, compromised power of the world and chose the power of the Holy Spirit. Some would say it was a mistake. You can wind up on a cross that way. But it was that compassionate self-emptying that 'turned the world upside down'.

When Christ was made an offer by the one who was against him – the anti-Christ - he answered by using words from the Bible he knew and read. 'God says that we do not live only by consuming bread'. 'It is written, Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.' 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' Wonder what we say to the inner voice that pulls us in the wrong direction? The word 'devil' comes from the Greek 'diabolos' – dia = around and bollo = to throw. The devil can be seen as one who throws things about, or in our vernacular 'the work of the devil is just to get us muddled'. And, on another tack, what is wrong with putting God to the test? If God is big enough, God will pass all our tests - even our quest for concrete proof of God's existence and benevolence. I mean, who needs faith anyway?

But it is faith to which we are called. Let us see faith 'as a relationship – not regulation; quest – not arrival; direction – not success; obedience – not experience; God in our midst – not distant'. We are constantly invited to believe, even though we have not seen. We are invited to cooperate with the grace that is already there. And there are no barriers – race, gender or creed. 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Speaking of salvation. Lent was originally the time to prepare new believers for Baptism. In the early church baptism of new believers occurred each Easter Day. Prior to their baptism, a period was set aside for instruction in the faith; so Lent's original purpose was for the making of disciples. Will our Lenten journey attract others to Jesus? It will, as we really become PEOPLE OF PRAYER. Now that's a tall order! Being people of prayer means that we must recover an authentic attentiveness to God. Prayer is a continuing communication with the Almighty who is concerned with every aspect of our lives and loves to hear from us. It's not so much the words, but the tuning in; the listening to the 'still, small voice'. It is also little wonder that prophets, saints and everyday believers have found it necessary to remove themselves from the routine which probably acts as a roadblock when it comes to 'peace and quiet'. We are pilgrim people and our souls and minds need rest and detachment.

Two other aspects of a 'holy lent' are FASTING and ALMSGIVING. The true, spiritual significance of fasting is in the invitation to hunger for God. Fasting symbolizes the truth that the way of being a disciple of Jesus is to be willing to concentrate our energies into never ceasing to be disciples. We recall that when Jesus' followers asked him why they couldn't heal the epileptic mute boy, Jesus said, 'You can only do this by deep prayer and fasting.' Mark 9. 14 – 29. Help!

In the book of Tobias it is written that 'prayer and fasting are good, but better than either is almsgiving accompanied by righteousness...' Tobit 12.8 Almsgiving is a form of prayer because it is giving *sacrificially* to God. In our Western Christian practice I don't consider that we know much about this. Jesus referred to this practice as he referred to alms in terms of, not just giving, but when. Fasting, prayer and almsgiving to Jesus it seems were not negotiable. The first Christians knew this. 'There was no needy person among them... everyone shared and all needs were met.' Acts 4: 34-35

Lent is no easy ride as it calls for a joyful discipline as we anticipate Easter when Christ will rise again in our hearts and minds. The journey will have just started – again.



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