

Lent I (C)
Deuteronomy 26.1-11; Romans 10.8-13; Luke 4.1-13
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
25 February 2007

“NAMING BLESSINGS AND NAMING TEMPTATIONS”

~Paul H. Friesen~

Today is the first Sunday of our season of Lent. We have been preparing ourselves for it, and now it has come. Lent arrives every year, through the mercy of God, whether we want it or not. It arrives by means of the yearly season first marked out by the ancient date of the Passover, at the time of the Exodus of the Israelites, when they were liberated from slavery. The same season of the year, more than a thousand years later, revealed that other great work of God at Easter, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the liberation of humanity from the power of sin and death. This is the great two-thousand year old day towards which we Christians around the world now have begun walking, again, this year. Like Lent, Easter will come whether we are ready or not.

How shall we walk through this season of our year?

I found myself, the week before last, late in the day, in a grocery store looking through a rack of left-over Valentine's cards. You can tell what a romantic I am. The despairing woman next to me was also looking for a card, so several times we pointed out better and worse cards to each other. But I found the one I was hoping to give away, all by myself. The card said: 'Thanks for putting up with me all these years.' Perfect. But I liked the card even better because of the second line: 'Even when you were mad at me for no reason.'¹ It was a charming way (I thought) to acknowledge that apologies sometimes aren't really apologies. We need to admit that shortcoming we all share. And so we need to hear the important point related to it, raised by our preacher a few days ago, on Ash Wednesday.

Fr. Daniel Rizg, our friend from St. Nina's Coptic Orthodox Church in Halifax, reminded us that the 'renewal of our hearts' promised by Christ can be blocked if we refuse to take responsibility for our lives—but lay responsibility somewhere else, at someone else's feet.

Lent is the season in which we focus on what we should be doing all year round. We refuse to blame others for our own lives or the state of the world, and accept responsibility for ourselves and for the whole messy human condition. This is what Jesus did in our famous Gospel story, and he asks us to do. Who has to deal with the problem—whatever it is? We do.

¹ This is a true story from 14 February 2007, told by permission. The card is entitled, 'Happy Valentine's Day' (Kansas City: Shoebox/Hallmark, n.d.).

But our Scriptures today won't let us accept responsibility for our failures without asking us to assign responsibility for our blessings. So that is where we must begin with the Scriptures for the first Sunday in Lent.

In the reading from the Book of *Deuteronomy* we have a wonderful Jewish liturgy described from the perspective of those about to receive their inheritance, the Promised Land, a place to live, granted to them for no reason...but that God loved them. That liturgy can be summed up in this way:

First, when your family has its first good harvest on its plot, take the first fruits and grains that ripen and put them in a basket, and walk away from your home and your harvest.

Second, journey to the Tabernacle with your basket, and say to the priest on duty: 'I'm here to tell God that I am now enjoying what God promised us.'

Third, let the priest take your basket and set it in front of the altar. When he does, cry out to God in the priest's hearing: 'My people were homeless Iraqis, and we went as poor immigrants to Egypt where we became the people of Israel. When we were oppressed, God freed us from slavery with miracles we hadn't asked for and granted us this land, a land that is amazingly fertile. And so, O Lord, we have brought back the very first and best of the harvest to thank you for your goodness.' Then fall silent.

Fourth, bow down before the Lord God; lay prostrate, your face on the floor in order to show with your body what you mean with your gift and with your words.

Fifth, get up off your face, and invite the priests who happen to be on duty, and any strangers who happen to be in town to a large party that evening, a party that you will host and cater out of the large wagon of supplies you have brought from your bounty, of which the basket was a small sign.

Sixth (and this takes us to *Deuteronomy* 6.12, just one verse beyond our assigned reading): Go home, take a tenth of all that you have harvested and give it away (in the words of the verse) to 'the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, that they might eat their fill in your settlements.'²

What a liturgy! It began with a harvest, moved through an act of worship, continued with a banquet, and ended with feeding the hungry. All worship, all the way.

It sounds a bit like St. Paul's description of the liturgy to the Corinthians. They brought food to the home in which the Eucharist was held. And then Paul said:

² Unless otherwise noted all biblical quotations are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

‘For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me...For as long as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.’³

This was in fact the shape of the Eucharist in the early church, as found in a well-known manuscript from the early 200s a.d. in Rome, called the ‘Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus.’ The liturgy begins with the Bishop’s calls and the people’s responses: ‘The Lord be with you. *And with thy spirit.* Lift up your heart. *We lift them up unto the Lord.* Let us give thanks to the Lord. *It is meet and right.*’

Does it sound familiar? The liturgy continues: ‘We give thee thanks, O God, through thy beloved Servant Jesus Christ, whom at the end of time thou didst send to us [as] a Saviour and Redeemer... whom thou didst send from heaven into the womb of the Virgin...Who, fulfilling thy will, and winning for himself a holy people, spread our his hands when he came to suffer, that by his death he might set free them who believed in thee...Taking bread and giving thanks to thee [he] said: Take, eat; this is my body, which is broken for thee.’⁴ And then there are notes in this manuscript about milk, and honey and olives and cheese and roses and lilies and pomegranates and grapes and pears, and more, on the altar (table). And there are notes about meals to be shared, and none were to be overlooked, certainly not widows and the poor.

And it all looks a little bit like our experience this morning, doesn’t it? We have offerings of bread and wine, and music, and envelopes with our other offerings; we stand and sit and kneel with the celebrant as we thank God for delivering us, through Christ, from slavery and bondage; the potluck luncheon that we have brought to enjoy and share is offered to all who worship with us; and at the Annual General Meeting we deliberate about what we are doing and can do for others, with the bounty that God has granted us, so that the others, young and old, rich and poor, may also rejoice that God has delivered them to the promised land.

So to turn back a few pages; our shared life always returns to assigning responsibility for our gifts to God. This is another way of saying that thanksgiving must be the bedrock of any Christian community. And out of that thanksgiving comes our generosity to others—even in Lent.

So, why is Lent necessary? Why must we interrupt this wonderful cycle of thanksgiving to God that ever becomes giving what we have been given to others? Well, we know there was a snake in Adam and Eve’s garden as sure as Christ confronted evil incarnate in his desert. And then there is the sad record of

³ *I Corinthians* 11.22-26.

⁴ *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*, ed. and trans. B.S. Easton (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1934), p.35

our heeding the voice of evil. It is true that evil is really only the absence of good. *But for that absence of good we must take responsibility. This is our shared task in Lent.*

What did St. Paul also say just before those stirring words addressed to the Corinthians, on which is based the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist, or Holy Communion for all Christians? Let me quote the preamble. 'Now in the following instructions I do not commend you,' said the Apostle, 'because...when you come together, it is not to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk.'⁵ 'Examine yourself,' the Apostle concludes.

Examine ourselves. Understand how we are implicated in what happens when the banquet the Lord has planned for us, a celebration of our liberation, leaves some hungry and disheartened, and others stuffed and blissfully ignorant of the plight of the other. There is nowhere left to look but at ourselves.

In today's Gospel, the great Lenten Gospel, Jesus comes face to face with temptation for us and promises to go into our own temptations beside us. It is not a question of simply avoiding temptation, though we pray with Jesus that we might be delivered from temptation. It is a matter of accepting the responsibility to look temptation in the face, and reckon with it, as we continue on our pilgrimage through life.

In the *Epistle to the Hebrews* which we read on Sundays last fall we heard these words: 'We see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels... It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make [Jesus] the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings...For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin...Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered: and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him...Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace in the time of need.'⁶

Jesus, the incarnate son of God, whom we confess as the second person of the Holy Trinity—though sinless—was made perfect through grappling with temptation. Jesus accepted responsibility for his predicament as he met the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil.

How do we meet temptation and accept responsibility to grapple with it? The Scriptures say much about this. But one point is very clear. To grapple with temptation we have to see it for what it is. Jesus was presented with the obvious:

⁵ *I Corinthians* 11.17-21.

⁶ *Hebrews* 2.9-10; 4.15; 5.8-9; 4.16.

Jesus refused Satan's invitation to worship Satan (God's creature) instead of God (the creator of all). But Jesus was presented with less obvious temptations. He was challenged to presume upon God's grace, to let God catch him as he leapt from the Temple roof, and to abuse power by using it to turn stones into bread. Jesus named it all as temptation, and so must we.

Easter came early in 1937, on the 28th of March to be precise. So by mid-April Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran theologian and pastor was able to gather what were called the clergy of the 'Confessing Church.'

This was their second gathering—they had first met in 1935 to find ways to be faithful to God in a Nazi state that, Bonhoeffer knew, had its boot on the throat of the church. This wasn't obvious to many, who thought they must be loyal to the Nazi government to be loyal to their country.

From the 12th to the 17th of April Bonhoeffer delivered lectures on... temptation. His lectures in the little town of Finkenwalde survived though he was executed at the age of 39 weeks before the end of the Second World War. He said to the clergy of the 'Confessing Church': 'The voice of the tempter does not come out of an abyss [clearly] recognized as "Hell". [The voice] completely conceals its origin...The denial of origin belongs to the essence of the seducer.'⁷ Its not that we can get temptation labelled and then have it over and done with. As St. Augustine said at the end of his comments on Christ's temptation: 'Satan will return.'⁸

Satan had been coming for some years. Satan did return. Nine days after the end of the clergy conference the Nazis helped bomb Guernica, Spain at the invitation of the Spanish fascists, a bombing so horrifying it has been enshrined in several forms of art. Eighteen months came *Kristalnacht*. And as we all know, things got worse and worse till we arrived at the Holocaust. It seems obvious now. But the temptations increased slowly, with pledges of true, God fearing belief and the punishment of the enemies of the country, inside and outside. As Bonhoeffer said of the action in the Garden of Eden, so he said of his own day I his own words: 'The tempter must introduce himself in the name of God... "Has God really said [this]? Ought not another construction be put on [God's] word?''⁹

We pray in this Lent that we might be delivered from such temptations. But we also pray that we might name such temptations (and the many smaller ones) for what they are, and accept the responsibility to meet them with Christ at our side, who met temptation, and suffered, and triumphed.

⁷ In 'Temptation', trans. Eberhard Bethge, in *Creation and Fall & Temptation* (London: SCM, 1959), p.102.

⁸ In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Luke*, ed. Arthur A. Jost (Downers Grove: InterVarsityPress, 2003), p. 77.

⁹ *Ibid.*

In this Eucharist we thank God for all God's blessings granted humanity, and for all God's blessings to this parish over this past year. And in this Eucharist, we turn to God for the courage promised to name temptation.