

First Sunday In Lent

10.03.2019
By Janet Foggie

Introduction

Ethics is often seen as a dry discipline, a waste of time, but in many of our daily decisions, concerning food, power, risk taking and authority, ethics quickly comes to the fore, and, for Jesus, making the right ethical decision is what defeats the devil in this story.

It is possibly too easy to focus on the spiritual dimension of this passage and not look at the actual application it has to the temptations we face in our daily lives and how we deal with them. This text is very familiar for many, and so it can be a challenge to see afresh the truths contained within it.

Read the text and think about what it tells us of Jesus' ethics.

Text

Luke 4:1–13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."

Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God,

and serve only him.'"

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,'

and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Comment

The temptations of Jesus demonstrate to us the very human moments when we have to face ethical decisions, when we are hungry, or perhaps our children are hungry, when we are tempted by political power, in the working world, or the domestic setting, power tempts us as it tempted Jesus. Finally in taking risks, there is a temptation in recklessness and in the too firm belief in faith as a 'rescue service' or a 'safety net'.

When humans come to argue about ethics, there is often an early loss in the actual ethical behaviour of those engaged in that discussion. In the era of the Reformation, Erasmus and Luther disagreed, for example, on the subject of whether humans have freedom of choice, a dispute which has run through the ages of Christian ethical thinking. In the era of the reformation disputes like this led to torture, disfigurement and deaths on both sides. It seems ironic to us in the 21st century that religion of love, follow Jesus who refused all the temptations place before him, might be induced to such antagonism, and yet even today, there are Christians who feel it their duty to correct, oppose or even psychologically, if not physically, harm other Christians simply because of their ethical beliefs.

If we think for a moment about whether we ourselves believe or feel free to choose, this changes how we read this text. Is Jesus tempted as a human is tempted, because of his humanity? If so, then we are all free to choose to resist temptation. However it may be that Jesus was only free to choose because he is divine, and that we are 'lesser mortals' for whom temptation and its consequences are predestined by an all-powerful God. What does this choice, of whether to accept free will or not, change for us in reading the text

When we find ourselves in situations of conflict, it can be an easy first move to draw a metaphorical line somewhere in the definitions of ethical or unethical, free or unfree, truly a Christian or not a Christian. We feel the need to identify a group to which we belong, and therefore a group to which we do not belong. If this temptation were curbed in the century of Luther and Erasmus much pain might have been avoided.

Is Jesus lied to by the devil, who tells him that the devil has been given the authority to ascribe the leadership of the kingdoms of the world?

Or in your estimation is there a devil who truly has this power? Either way, the definition of 'in-group' and 'out-group' people can only be part of the false kingdoms, the human-based groups of our world.

It seems to me the ruling of kingdoms, like the drawing of groups, is about factions, and a negative model of power. Jesus cuts through with his answer 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'

Response

Think about a situation in which you have power. It could be giving a talk, managing others at work, organising the local volunteer group, holding a conversation, caring for people younger than yourself, even just cooking a meal or hosting guests.

How does it feel to hold power?

How does it change your choices or your tone?

Who in your ordinary life has less power than you? Who do you most regularly interrupt? Or forget to listen to carefully? Who do you step in front of, literally or metaphorically?

What does this passage speak to you about wielding power?

OR

Draw a diagram of the groups to which you belong, maybe some overlap, maybe not. Is there anywhere that you feel your group identity might conflict with Christ's solution to power-grabs which is 'Worship the lord your god, and serve only him' Does this enable you to see conflict between groups differently? Or do you find you can read the temptations of Jesus and yet feel you have still been consistently right all along?

Prayer

God of the kingdoms of this world, we seek to worship you and serve only you. Enable us to understand the places where we make judgements, draw lines, make

distinctions, impose definitions.

Let us see the factions of this world for what they are, and free us to live in humility with our labels, our groups, and our kingdoms.

In and through our Lord Jesus Christ who defied temptation by directing himself back to you,

Amen

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Power and Privilege