

The First Sunday of Lent, February 17, 2013 Nigel Taber-Hamilton
On the Gospel: Luke's version of Jesus' temptations

“Who then is this, that.....?” That's the beginning of a series of questions asked frequently in Mark's gospel of Jesus: “Who then is this, that even the wind and the seas obey him” comes to mind.

But today we might use that same opening phrase and ask it just as reasonably about the figure that Luke names as the “diabolou”. Of course, the stereo-type of this figure is the red guy with the pitchfork, the tail, and horns who's constantly trying to get you to join him in Hades! By hook or by crook....!

The word, though, means something a little different: “adversary”, or “accuser”, or even “prosecutor”. In Jewish tradition this figure is not at war with God over human souls, but is a servant of God, to be understood – especially in this passage – as the one who tests, who picks away to see if Jesus' apparently Spirit-filled holiness is genuine, or if, instead, it's just an exterior veneer, only skin deep.

In this Gospel, Jesus has come from the spiritual ‘high’ of his baptism by John in the Jordan, and – as part of that – a pretty significant endorsement from God! That's a pretty stellar resume! Jesus will have much to prove.

So, says, Luke, let's get going! Let's answer some basic questions about this as-yet not well known prophet from the Galilee!

In that context – of Jesus' own emerging identity, and the restated identify of the prosecutor – it's entirely reasonable to preface the exchange we have today with these sorts of words from this prosecutor: “let's find out who you really are, Jesus. Here are some moral dilemmas for you to chew on”:

First – “If you could feed the hungry of the world, wouldn't you do it, no matter the personal cost? Wouldn't that be the right thing to do?”

Then, “If you could fix this sadly warring, impoverished world, wouldn't you do it, no matter the personal cost?”

And finally, “ If you don't tell people who you really are they won't believe you....!”

If the Prosecutor's words are only for Jesus, the we have an interesting, if somewhat distanced, spectacle here. Might be worth speculating who'll come out on top, because it doesn't directly affect us!

But they're not. Questions like these are directed at the reader – us – as much as the one questioned in scripture.

Wouldn't you like to feed the hungry of the world, even if there's some personal cost?

Wouldn't you like to end war and poverty, even if there's some personal cost?

I'll bet most of us would say "yes"..... "yes, but....!" But "what's the personal cost, WHAT'S AT STAKE, HERE?"

The one who defines the moment, who frames the question, greatly influences the answer if the one questioned allows it. As I mentioned on Wednesday, Socrates once said that "the unexamined life is not worth living". Perhaps a rider to that should be "the unexamined question isn't – or shouldn't be – worth answering"!!

Fundamentally all of the Prosecutor's wonderfully probing questions are inviting Jesus to open up and talk about what lies at the heart of his identity – what lies at the core of all human identity: our motivations, our beliefs, our hopes, our dreams, and how all of those things come together to make up living.

For Jesus – and for us – the way we answer those questions turns out to be very revealing.

It turns out that the "cost" – the thing that's at stake – for acting in the ways the Prosecutor proposes is the loss of personal identity and integrity – and Jesus "gets" that immediately.

All of the questions have to do with power and desire to control that leads us to seek power, and how that power is used. . We of course assume that Jesus would use the power the Prosecutor suggests with compassion and generosity – would use it well. Jesus makes no such assumption!

And wisely so! Human history is replete with others who have believed they would exercise power with compassion and generosity "for the good of the people". When leaders believe that they are capable of "saving the world" then their people tend to die. There are endless leaders who started out with good intentions but became dictators "for the good of the people". The first Bolsheviks had an impressive communitarian vision that morphed into a state that killed more of it's own citizens than any nation in history, including the Nazis. There are endless religious leaders who done the same: Jim Jones and the People's Temple, or David Koresh and the Branch Davidians are but two recent examples.

What marks them out as different? Perhaps their belief that they were able to control everything. That's the flip side of power – the perceived ability to control. In the end we all want control, especially over our own lives.

This is not Jesus' model of response, and nor should it be ours. Jesus' response was to recognize right away that he wasn't in control, that God was – and is. All his responses are about trusting in God – that it is from God not simply from bread, that we find life in all it's fullness; that it is in recognizing that God is God and we are not that we advance the work of bringing justice and peace to this fractured world; and that, ultimately any time we worship something that's less than God – power, authority, money, fame....you can add anything that you make an idol of here! – we

not only devalue God we devalue ourselves.

These temptations will always be with us – Luke observes insightfully that the Prosecutor’s departure wasn’t final. We feel comfortable with the things we think we can control, but nervous about those we can’t; and much of our time is spent trying to control those things that are – or should be – beyond our reach, for everyone’s sake, including ours.

Jesus’ model is offered to us today: trust in God and all will be well. So part of the Lenten journey is given to us today: trying to learn more about trusting God and less about controlling our lives. Perhaps it’s that – the desire and attempt to control – that, ultimately is The Thing (and maybe the only thing, this year!) we need to learn to give up this season – keep your chocolate and focus on the big picture. Amen.

Lent is an invitation to examine the sorts of propositions about how we should live our lives that are presented to us by our world, which nowadays functions in the place of – or perhaps on behalf of – the Prosecutor.