

## Sermon – Wesley, Canberra. First day in Lent 2011

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Genesis 2: 15-17. 3: 1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5: 12-19; Matt 4: 1-11

As today is the first day of Lent, I typed 'Lent' into Google and came across an amazing Catholic website ([www.catholic.org](http://www.catholic.org)) that asked people what they were *giving up* for Lent. I tell you, a comedian could not have written the material better. Of the pages and pages of responses, meat, alcohol, soda, snacks, smoking and chocolate featured heavily. One person gave up soda and Taco Bell food which, for those not acquainted with this fine American cuisine, is fast-food Mexican, but, the writer then added, "this has proved very difficult since I work at Taco Bell and get free sodas." Another was more philosophical about the specifics - "I may be wrong, she said, "but I don't think it matters to God if we give up pizza." Someone surrendered alcohol but then asked a question for clarification, "When is Lent over? I've heard different dates."

As a sign of the times, giving up TV, video games, Facebook and online shopping also scored heavily. Someone wrote, "I have given up television for Lent. What was I thinking? Even worse, I don't have anyone to blame, but the Holy Spirit. However, I am still in negotiations with the Holy Spirit as to whether I can watch a little on the weekends and maybe an hour a day during the week." There were also resolves to change relationships. One woman wrote, "I am going to try not to fight with my husband, God help me with this one, 40 days is a long time." Another said, "The most bizarre thing I once gave up for Lent was complaining. It freaked everyone out, so I didn't give that up this year." And speaking of complaining, one woman gave up coffee and negative thoughts, but she said, "I'm having more trouble with the second one. It's hard in my line of work in customer service."

I was raised in a Presbyterianism that did not "do" Lent in the way our Catholic and, I think, Anglican neighbours did. Giving up things and a smudge of ash on the forehead smelled like "Popish" innovations to our Puritan noses. In my tradition, things swung into action with Palm Sunday, darkened on Good Friday and blossomed on Easter Sunday with the only nod towards commercialism one Easter egg, usually the teeth-cracking pink candy kind. Things are different today with denominations sharing what we have in common. Lent is a time for reflection and taking stock, when the faithful rededicate themselves during the forty day lead up to the crucifixion of Jesus. The forty days are symbolic, imitating the forty days Jesus spent in the desert after his baptism and before starting his ministry. As our Gospel reading for today tells us, the same Spirit that descended on Jesus like a dove immediately led him into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil.

Before we get too far into this story of Jesus' temptations however, there are a few things to clarify because you may already be doing the theological cringe over a story of an encounter with the Devil. Many Bible stories can turn us off these days because they employ imagery and language from an ancient worldview that no longer works yet some people *insist* we take literally. No doubt many will preach this story today as a real life cosmic show-down between God in human form and a flesh-and-blood Devil and will then apply it for

today as our personal battle against individual temptations intentionally sent by Satan. By insisting on reading this story literally, however, and then trivializing it with modern-day examples of personal weaknesses and petty obsessions of overindulged lifestyles, we miss the grand impact this story would have had on Jewish hearers in Jesus' day. The mention of forty days would remind them of the forty years wandering in the wilderness. The stones turned into bread would bring to mind the miraculous provision of food - manna - in the desert. Satan testing Jesus would remind them of the story of Job, where Satan or The Accuser was not the enemy of God he would later become but a member of God's Court whose basic duty was to test or accuse human beings before God. And Jesus being tested at the start of his prophetic ministry would remind them of their many prophets, also called by God, who were tested by trials and struggles.

Such stories threaded through with symbolic meaning from a community's past have been called fantasy narratives -- like parables that invite elaboration and creative reflection. Fantasy, like the term myth, has a "not-true" connotation today in a world that sees empirical verification as the only form of truth but, as religion scholar Karen Armstrong points out, the ancient world lived happily with two equally valid ways of knowing - *logos* and *mythos*. *Logos* described how humans operated in the world, like making weapons or ruling kingdoms, while *mythos* tried to interpret human grief and find ultimate meanings in life's struggles. While those who insist on reading the Bible literally claim that they are returning us to the Bible, they have, in fact, stolen the Bible *from* us with their insistence on putting *mythos* into *logos* boxes with literal floods, talking snakes and supernatural births, rather than asking what these stories tell us about the human quest. No doubt there was an historical tradition of Jesus retreating to a wilderness place, but this story of Jesus' temptations follows a pattern seen in *many* initiation stories where heroes in the ancient world were tested or tempted to divert from their original call. In Native American tradition, we have the Vision Quest. The Greek heroes were confronted with superhuman tests to prove their worthiness; and most indigenous traditions demanded ordeals, fasting and ecstatic experiences to demonstrate specially anointed gifts.

The temptations of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry can and have been interpreted in many ways, which is the sign of a good story. I would like to read them as clues to how the Gospel writers saw Jesus and his mission. After forty days of fasting, Jesus, not surprisingly, is famished. The tempter suggests he resort to the miraculous and sensational to provide for his needs - turn the stones into bread. Satan then suggests he demonstrate supernatural powers by jumping off the roof of the temple, relying on angels to break his fall. Lastly Jesus is promised power over all the world if he will compromise his mission by changing his allegiance - something like politics today. The Jesus of the story rejects sensationalism through miracles, engaging the supernatural or the lure of worldly power as ways in which he will follow his call to serve God by bringing in God's alternate reign of justice and peace. Isn't it ironic that most Christian beliefs are based on the *very* ideas Jesus rejected as compromising his calling -- miracles as proof of his mission, arguing his supernatural status and establishing worldly power as demonstrated in the church that evolved around his story. If we ask people today *why* they believe in Jesus, these are the things they quote but this, I believe, is a distorted picture of what our founder offered that eventually led to his death.

I would like to suggest that this Lent, these forty days that recall the temptations for Jesus to claim power for himself rather than serving God, we take time to rethink this Jesus who rejected the very things that characterize the way we celebrate him today. Few of us are in the position to take off to the desert and live off the land for forty days and nights, ignoring civic and family responsibilities, but we can create our own virtual "wildernesses" to give us space to think. What will we think about? Try asking ourselves the very Lenten question "Who was Jesus, what was his mission and what does Easter signify for me?" Many people are asking these questions today as the dogmas of the centuries that have encrusted Jesus are being brought into question. Did Jesus claim to be God? This might sound like heresy but the central question for the Christian Bishops who gathered together three hundred years after Jesus' death to formulate our creeds was, "Is Jesus God - of the same substance as God - or simply *like* God?" The virgin birth? How did this become a central Christian doctrine arguing the divine origins of Jesus when it is not mentioned in Paul's writings, the earliest writings we have, nor in the earliest of our four Gospels, Mark, nor in John? The resurrection and ascension? What really happened? Paul and the various gospels don't tell the same story so how can we make definitive statements almost two thousand years later? *Was* there a bodily resurrection as some claim, or was it the realization in the minds of distraught followers that the Spirit they encountered in Jesus and in their life together had not disappeared with his death and this truth encouraged them to continue his message? And what of the atonement, the explanation of why Jesus had to die? The theory mostly heard in our traditional hymns and in many Christian circles today is that God was affronted by human sin and required payment by death, but no human was "good enough to pay the price of sin." God then sent his only Son, confusingly also God, to be killed as a perfect blood sacrifice to appease an affronted Father. It comes as a surprise to many to learn that this was not one of the earlier understanding of Jesus' death, which centred more on a cosmic conflict between God and the Devil, but rather came into play in medieval England, modeled on England's feudal system of a Lord of the Manor whose serfs deserved death for disobedience. We don't have time to trace other atonement explanations, except perhaps to quote the great reformer Florence Nightingale who thought this medieval explanation barbaric. Ideas of God seeking revenge by punishing eternally, or needing propitiation like an offended parent, or sending Jesus to a torturous death as a sacrifice were hangovers, she said, from an era that demanded such judgment and punishment. We now think differently -- we reform offenders rather than simply punish.

Let me return to my challenge for this Lent. Don't go through another Easter with unresolved doubts and questions about the man Jesus, crucified so long ago. Don't feel guilty if you cannot conjure up sufficient remorse for your personal sins by staring at gruesome paintings of an anguished, blood-stained Jesus. A fifty-something nun once told me that, as a four year old, she saw such a picture and asked why Jesus was being treated so cruelly. "Because of your sins," was the answer. She did not know what this meant but resolved never to sin. When she was seven, she was taught that sex was linked with sin. She did not know what that meant but decided to have nothing to do with sex. She joined a convent as a teenager to avoid these things. She does not regret her life work, but she does regret the way the story of Jesus was told to her. Many contemporary theologians have moved away from explanations of the Easter event that focus on sin, blood sacrifice and cosmic battles, trying instead to recover the Jewish man Jesus who tried to bring in an alternate reign of justice and

peace within Judaism under Roman oppression. The Jesus we meet in *this* scenario was committed to his cause enough to die for it, even when he could have compromised and avoided death. His message of compassion is central to most religions of the world -- love God and your neighbour - and as he played it out in seeking justice for the poor and outcast, it inevitably brought him into conflict with those who held the worldly powers in his day. He died for his cause because of the sins of those who perpetrated such injustices, and his passion and purpose lives on in *all* those across cultures and religions who work to bring in alternate reigns of justice, whatever the cost.

I invite you to contemplate *this* Jesus in Lent. How to do it? Not surprisingly as an author, I encourage you to take advantage of the wealth of writings by religious scholars now available in the public marketplace, whether in books or online. In the past, laity had to rely on what they heard from the pulpit for thinking about Jesus and, in many cases, the challenges to traditional dogmas which have been alive and well in theological halls for a couple of centuries now, did not make it to the pew to "disturb" the laity. Yet many of us have been disturbed for years and many went to their graves with their questions. Others have simply given up, walking out church doors, while some remain, stifling questions in order to enjoy the camaraderie of the faithful. Others have turned to action - what we do is more important than what we believe - but it does not need to be either-or. Our images of God and Jesus *matter* because they determine the way we live our lives.

As the old hymn says, "what will you do with Jesus, neutral you cannot be." Rather than asking what are we giving up for Lent, the question can be, what are we taking on? Amen