

**First Sunday of Lent – Year A
10 February 2008
St. Anne’s Episcopal Church
Lee’s Summit, Missouri**

In the name of the one holy and undivided trinity, one God. AMEN.

We always hear today’s Gospel story, in one form or another, at this time in the church year. The temptation of Jesus in the wilderness is the subject of the Gospel reading on the first Sunday of Lent in every year of our lectionary cycle. And, today, we have heard this story as it was told in Matthew’s Gospel.

Just after his baptism by John the Baptist in the Jordan River, virtually dripping with the waters of baptism, and with the words “This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” still ringing in his ears – Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness and encounters the devil – this figure that represents the power of evil, all that opposes the will of God.

Perhaps not surprisingly, it seems that no sooner than Jesus’ true identity had been announced by the voice of the Father from heaven, that this identity is immediately put to the test. As we have just heard,

If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.

If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down (from the pinnacle of the temple).

...I will give you (all the kingdoms of the world), if you will fall down and worship me.

One of the most famous interpretations of this story of Jesus and the devil in the wilderness is found in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's "The Grand Inquisitor" - a section of the great novel *The Brothers Karamozov*. It is a fantasy related by one of the novel's characters - a fantasy that I think can help us to explore just what these temptations might really have meant.

This fantasy is set in 16th century Spain, during the grimmest part of the Inquisition - a time when those judged to be heretics were being burned daily "to the greater glory of God." During this time - in fact the day after 100 heretics had been burned - unexpectedly and unannounced, Jesus appears in bodily form in the square before the Cathedral in Seville.

Even though he moves about silently, those who see him recognize him at once. People gather around him, drawn to him by an irresistible force.

In Dostoyevsky's words...

The sun of love burns in his heart; light, understanding, and spiritual power flow from his eyes and set people's hearts vibrating with love for him. He holds his hands out to them, blesses them, and just from touching him, or even his clothes, comes a healing power.

Before long, a blind man in the crowd has recovered his sight and a little seven-year-old girl whose coffin is being carried by has been raised back to life.

In this fantasy, an excited crowd is gathering around Jesus when the aged Cardinal of Seville, the Grand Inquisitor, happens to come by with his entourage. He is almost 90 years old, full of worldly wisdom and hardened by many years of exercising absolute authority.

He sees immediately who has reappeared and what is happening as a result. However, instead of falling on his knees at Jesus' feet, the Cardinal of Seville, the Grand Inquisitor, quickly orders his guards to arrest Jesus and to put him in prison.

No one in the crowd argues or tries to stop what is happening. No, the crowd - only a few minutes before so excited at the presence of Christ - is silenced and simply moves back and to a person falls prostrate in front of the Grand Inquisitor.

According to the fantasy, that night the old Cardinal, all alone, pays a visit to Jesus in the dark, narrow prison cell where he has had him placed. The old man begins by asking Jesus, "Why have you come to interfere and to make things difficult for us?"

And then, he says, in essence, "You were really wrong, Jesus - totally, absolutely wrong in your assessment of human nature. You believed that men and women are truly children of God, capable of deciding things for themselves, of taking responsibility for their lives and for the world. You treated them as if they were partners with God. When in fact they are by nature nothing but slaves and children."

"Where you made your mistake was at the very beginning of your ministry - back in the wilderness. The Spirit of this world came to you there and tried to show you what would work here, but you wouldn't listen to him. He tried to tell you that people want their physical hungers satisfied. They want to be mystified with spectacular "parlor tricks" and miraculous stunts, and ultimately they want to be dominated by rulers in authority who tell them what to do so they don't have to make any choices. That's how you have to relate to them"

The Grand Inquisitor went on...

“The Spirit of this world understood human nature, but you wouldn’t listen to him. No. You - with your impossible dreams of freedom and responsibility. I can hear you now, ‘Man does not live by bread alone. Men and women are more than mouths and physical hungers to be fed.’”

“Jesus, you refused to give them the razzle-dazzle of jumping off the pinnacle of the temple and being caught by angels, instead believing that men and women could actually think for themselves and make decisions rather than being won over by stunts.”

“And, finally, you refused to take the role of Caesar and get involved in the only process that really works in this world - the process of power, coercion, and domination. You so foolishly believed that men and women are more than pawns and deserve better treatment.”

And, then the old Cardinal concluded,

“Well, Jesus, we understand what you refused to understand. You were totally and utterly wrong about people. And, unless you leave on your own right now, we will kill you all over again. You will be burned with the others.”

This conversation between Jesus and the Grand Inquisitor, as imagined by Dostoyevsky, is a powerful scene. And, I think it is an inspired interpretation of the temptation story.

What we see here is how Jesus struggled, successfully, to maintain the hiddenness of God and to allow humanity to retain what the Grand Inquisitor called the freedom to love or not to love the Christ. Human beings forced to worship Christ would not be free if they were coerced by a process of domination. They would not be truly free even if they were won over through bribery by having their physical hungers satisfied with bread or seduced by spectacular miracles.

Jesus knew that this freedom – this ability to love or not to love the Christ, to worship or not to worship Christ - was a gift given by God to human beings at creation, a gift that had been given to Adam and Eve in the Garden.

Jesus struggled to remain obedient to the Father and to do his Father's will on earth. To relate to human beings just as they had been created. Children of God, capable of deciding things for themselves, of taking responsibility for their lives and for the world. Partners with God.

In the film "Bruce Almighty," Bruce is a mortal who thinks he can run the world better than God can. And so, God grants him the opportunity to be God for awhile and to see how he does. The one thing that God says that Bruce cannot do, however, is to take away human freedom – free will.

In my favorite scene in the movie, Bruce asks God, "How can you make someone love you, if you can't take away their free will?"

And, God smiles wisely at Bruce and says, "Welcome to my world."

When Jesus refused the devil's temptations in the wilderness, Jesus was simply staying true to what God had already done in creation and validating his identity as God's own beloved. This one with whom God was well pleased. He was respecting God's creation – men and women who could take responsibility, who could make choices, and who were made free by God at creation.

Forcing, demanding love and devotion by taking away human freedom is a recurring theme throughout the ages – whether it was the devil in the wilderness, a story about the Inquisition in a 19th century novel, or a 21st century movie about a person who thinks he can be God.

Christ doesn't want love that is taken by bribery or razzle-dazzle or coercion. Christ wants love that is feely given by men and women who can make a choice. He knows that is the way we humans were created.

In this season of Lent, it would be good for us to remember that those 40 days and nights the wilderness was not the last time or place that Jesus heard a temptation that began with the words, "If you are the Son of God..."

No, he heard those words from the crowd as he hung on the cross, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross."

And, just as he had done in the wilderness, he remained true to the work the Father had given him to do. He remained obedient to his Father and accomplished his Father's will.

It was this serving, suffering, dying Jesus whom God vindicated by raising him from the dead. And, it was this Jesus – this one who refused to take our love and worship by bribery or trickery or coercion - who left as his parting words to us, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me...and, remember, I am with you always."

AMEN.