

“Steak on the Plate” – reflection for the first Sunday of Lent

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry. The devil said to him, If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread. Jesus answered, It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone.' The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, I will give you all their authority and splendour, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours. Jesus answered, It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.' The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. If you are the Son of God, he said, throw yourself down from here. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.' Jesus answered, It says: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

Luke 4: 1-13

During Lent we are discussing a question both in our weekly reflections and subsequent on-line conversations during 'Praying at Home'. We have borrowed the question from the title of a popular children's book by Sam McBratney, 'Guess how much I love you?' Love is not always an easy thing to measure. But as we journey through Lent towards the events of Holy Week and Easter, we hear the crucified Christ asking the question: 'Guess how much I love you?' Christ extends his arms on the cross and responds, 'This much.' This lockdown Lent, we are all invited to take time to reflect afresh on God's immeasurable love for us and our response to God.

“Steak on the plate”

I once heard someone say that Christianity isn't just “pie in the sky when we die”, but “steak on the plate while we wait”. We have a very short form of grace before meals in our house. The idea was to get the children into the habit without it being a boring adult thing. We simply say “Praise God”. Praising God is good for us, and for Him. God didn't give us the ten commandments because He's some kind of jealous ogre who must be obeyed, but because He's a loving, caring Father who wants no harm to come to His children. God knows what's best for us. He knows how safe it is for us little lambs to remain close to the shepherd. He wants us to have no other gods to distract us away from His love and protection. He wants us to live life to the full, He wants us to eat steak (spiritually speaking).

For 40 days and 40 nights we see the devil trying to distract Jesus from His Father. Of course, he got Jesus all wrong, thinking He could ever be distracted by worldly things. Jesus only has one God and one mission in mind - to do His Father's will. So here's question one, who or what are your little gods and what are you doing to prevent them from distracting you from the one true God? Following Jesus isn't always the easiest path, but if lent and Easter does nothing else it teaches us that our Lord's been there Himself and at those times when we feel alone in the desert, when we wonder what kind of *loving* Father this is, we must never forget that He did this, in person, to demonstrate that no amount of trial is insurmountable with Him on our side. That's how much He loves us!

A closer look at this passage helps us understand why this season is so important. Note first that Luke says Jesus is “led by the Spirit into the desert”. The Holy Spirit is God’s power, He often works as God’s voice, that “still small voice” of the soul. And it’s worth noting here, that He doesn’t always whisper sweet nothings or words of assurance. Sometimes we need to be prepared to listen even when we don’t particularly like what we hear! The one thing I can guarantee is that as long as you are sure this is God’s voice, He will NEVER mislead you, which is more than can be said for the Devil.

The next thing to remember is that Jesus isn’t having a physical conversation with a little man in red tights with a pitch fork and horns on his head! Our enemy is much more cunning and subtle than that. Satan is the world’s greatest ventriloquist. He’s expert at making us think that the voice is coming from another direction or another person entirely. So be very careful to discern just who is whispering in your ear. He who leads you into the desert is not necessarily your enemy and he who offers you help there may not necessarily be your friend! The devil tries three different distractions: food, power and protection. He begins by sowing a seed of doubt, “If you are the Son of God”...

How many times does he throw that one at us? “if you are a Christian...” Satan has a cunning way of making us feel ashamed “Call yourself a Christian?” He does it to undermine our faith, to try to condemn us and to make us feel so unworthy that we’re way beyond God’s forgiveness - a million miles from His love. Don’t fall into that trap, don’t let him make you feel this way. This Lent let’s look for the things we can *take* up rather than those we should *give* up, and here’s one useful exercise: Every night before you go to sleep, ask yourself “what have I done today that will please God?” Then ask the opposite, “what have I done that I’d rather not have done?” How’s your heavenly bank balance? This is one exercise we shouldn’t give up when Lent is over!

Let’s face it - that desert experience wasn’t exactly *steak on the plate* for Jesus, but He went through it anyway. That’s how much He loves us - that we might have steak – life in all its fullness. Alas, many Christians just settle for the last bit, the assurance that when they die they will go to heaven - and that’s wonderful - but God loves us much *more* than that. The *spiritual* food Jesus survived on through the desert is what we should consider as best, prime steak - the word of God. Trust me – my dad was a butcher!

Every time He was tempted, this is what He quoted, “it is written...” and here’s question two this morning, can you remember an appropriate bible verse for every tricky situation? Of course, it’s not just a matter of remembering. That’s just egg and chips. Real steak is about knowing your lines and *living by them* – in public AND in private. Your bible is the Bear Grills’ desert survival book, God’s instruction manual. Far too many people bungle their way through life without it, and the devil has a field day. I’m quite sure he wouldn’t have bothered Jesus had he not seen Him as a real threat. I have a good clergy friend who when he was having a really bad week would say, “I must be doing something right for the Lord this week, the devil’s having a right go at me!” In Jesus, we have a formidable ally. The closer we draw to Him and the better we know Him, the more formidable He becomes in our lives and the more of a threat He is to Satan. So please - don’t just pick up your bible on a Sunday or when you are in trouble, make time every day to read a chapter, get yourself a daily reading guide, make a Lenten promise to read it daily and to carry on reading after Easter.

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