

## **IDENTITY THEFT** (Lindfield 10 March 2019)

### **LUKE 4:1-13**

It really doesn't have to be bread, power or safety. Temptations. In today's Gospel reading the devil (the word can also be translated as Tempter) tries to seduce Jesus with the promise of bread when he's hungry, the glory and power of all the world's leaders, and the promise of rescue paired with the suggestion that God is not sufficient to keep him safe. And all Jesus has to do in return is worship Satan.

So in this scenario it's bread, power and safety. But it could have been something else. Which is the key to this story. The point isn't the specific temptations as such but rather the underlying nature of temptation itself.

Temptation can be either temptation *toward* something – usually portrayed as doing something you shouldn't - but rather is usually the temptation *away* from something – namely our relationship with God and the identity we receive in and through that relationship.

Too often Christians have focussed on all the things we shouldn't do. "Good Christians don't.....", instead of pointing us to the gift and grace of our identity as Children of God. But the devil knows better. Notice how each of the temptations seeks to erode and undercut Jesus' confidence in his relationship with God and therefore undermine Jesus' identity.

We ought not to be surprised by this. Remember in Genesis Ch. 3 the devil, in the form of a serpent tempts Eve. Eve says that God told them they would die if they ate the forbidden fruit. But the devil replies, "...you will not die. God knows if you eat it you will be like God, knowing good and evil". The devil was undermining Adam and Eve's confidence in God. They were made to believe that God was more selfish in withholding the fruit than the devil was in offering it. They quickly discovered that God's word was the true word.

In the wilderness Jesus picks up on this. Which is why when the devil offers him bread, he responds with an affirmation of trust in God. The next temptation is more transparent, offering Jesus the power of the world's leaders in return for Jesus' allegiance and worship. But again Jesus knows his allegiance can only be given to the one from whom he has received his identity. Finally, the devil proposes that God is not trustworthy, and goads Jesus into testing that relationship. But Jesus refuses.

In each case, the devil seeks to undermine Jesus' confidence in both God and himself. He seeks, that is, to erode Jesus' confidence that he is enough, that he is secure, that he is worthy of God's love. And in the face of these temptations, Jesus quotes the sacred story of Israel in order to assert that he is a part of that story and therefore reaffirm his identity as a child of God. Rooted in the Scriptures, that is, Jesus is reminded not only that he has enough and is enough but that he is of infinite value in the eyes of God.

Bread, power and safety. But it might just as well have been youth, health or wealth. Or confidence, fame and security. On one level, we experience specific temptations very concretely, but on another they are all the same, as they seek to shift our allegiance, trust and confidence away from God and toward some substitute that promises a more secure identity.

Which is why I think this passage is really about identity theft. And not simply the devil's failed attempt to steal Jesus' identity but all the attempts to rob us of ours.

Consider the media barrage of advertising. Nine times out of ten the goal of many ads is to create in us a sense of lack and inadequacy, followed by the implicit (or sometime explicit) promise that purchasing the advertised product will relieve our insecurity. Or consider how our politicians campaign. They seek to create in us an insecurity and fear. Terrorism, immigrants, corporations, joblessness, recession and so on. They make us afraid of something; tell us who's to blame for it then how they will fix it. When analysed, there's no need to fear at all. We just need to deal with it.

Our identity comes, not from what we do or what we have but who we are. We are human BEINGS made in God's image and likeness. We are not human havings or human doings. We are called to BE. The temptations we are subjected to are appealing to havings or doings which is why they are lies. The word of the devil in the Garden of Eden was a lie and the words to Jesus in the wilderness were lies. St Peter calls him, "a liar and the father of lies". God calls us to BE his children and only when we choose so to be then we can look at what we might do or need to have.

As we begin this period of Lent may it be a time of true reflection as we seek to re-discover who we are and what it means to be who we are. For Christians it began at our Baptism. Then we were brought into the family of God. God's mark was put on us and since then we are called to live out that Baptism as a beloved Child of God. To remind yourself of this, make the sign of the cross on your forehead and say, "I am God's beloved child".

Lent is often a time of self-denial, sacrifice and resisting temptation. But might we instead, or at least in addition, imagine that Lent could be an ideal time during which we remind each other of the love and grace of God poured into our hearts from the cross.

God loves us and will keep loving us no matter what and for this reason alone we are enough. In spite of all the messages to the contrary that bombard us with the opposite intent we are challenged to believe either God's word or the devil's lies. Remember the devil left Jesus seeking "an opportune time". He's never too far away but God is always with us. AMEN

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