

## Sermon: Towards a Holy Lent

After Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, he was led by the Spirit-*just-then-baptised-into* out into the wilderness; and Luke tells us that for forty days Jesus was tempted by the devil. I suspect most of us carry around the picture Matthew paints, where after 40 days Satan comes along with three questions, something like a final exam. Mark and even more emphatically Luke want us to understand this was *forty days of wrestling* – a prolonged period of formation and testing, boot camp for the soul!, preparing Jesus for the demanding work that lay ahead. To be sure, the possibilities he struggled over, so as to get his head on straight and heart in gear, [they] were challenging:

- discerning his truth ... his unshakable grounding in God;
- getting his values straight;
- getting his *modus operandi* nailed down;
- separating himself from the stuff that ‘presented as good’ but was actually distortion and–yes–evil!

... all of this was being accomplished out there.

The ‘40 days in the wilderness’ story is read every first Sunday of Lent to remind us – as we consciously turn towards Good Friday and then Easter – that we need to do such work also.

We too must wrestle with that which opposes wholeness within ourselves, our communities, and our world. We too must wrestle Evil. I doubt anyone would dispute my observation that our lives are increasingly steeped in worry, fear and anger. The

- lying,
- ‘othering’ & scapegoating,
- economic & military warring

of our world's autocrats are altogether shredding the fabric of not just humanity but the entire ecosphere. It is within *this context* that we come to *this year's* Lent,

- calling us apart to recognize, confess and lament what is mistaken;
- (*knowing just how enmeshed-in-it-all we are*) to seek forgiveness;
- wrestling to discern a true-to-God course to follow;

and *by that course* to move forward (i) yes, through these forty days alongside Jesus, but ultimately (ii) with him in his Passion and in the promise of the resurrection.

Early in church history, there came acute awareness within certain followers of Jesus that this 'spiritual work' had to be practiced, by them, unceasingly. We do not often speak of these ascetics because our focus is on the biblical period which precedes them. But, starting in the second century of the Common Era, there were Christians – still residing within their local communities and congregations – who renounced all but the minimum of possessions; they also became celibate; they upheld an ideal of life focused solely on prayer, and on consequent acts of mercy.

Records show that by the third century, ascetics were withdrawing to live remote from their home congregations, though continuing to perform works of mercy – care for the sick, orphans, widows and prisoners. In the writings of Origen and Clement of Alexandria we hear these ascetics' basic theology: it was the ideal of the martyr who hoped for nothing in this world but sought for union with Jesus Christ in his passion.

The desert fathers of Egypt are among the better known to us of the hermit ascetics. Their fame stems from the second half of the fourth century when they were constantly being visited by supplicants asking, "Speak to me a word, father, that I may live." Records of their answers

were compiled and have come down to us in the “Paradise of the Fathers”.

Two distinct ascetic paths evolved in Egypt in the fourth century. One, via a monk named Anthony, who renounced his inheritance and moved towards increasingly remote isolation, in order to wage war with demons (very much patterned after Jesus confronting Satan out in the wilderness). The second path was led by the monk Pachomius who, by the river Nile, started a community of ascetics characterized by strenuous labour and strict discipline. *Independently*, in Asia Minor, Basil of Caesarea founded an ascetic community, notably pursuing social purpose above individual salvation.

There were other ascetic leaders and movements. The sixth century Benedictines are a monastic community I hope to ‘unpack’ with you some other day, for the significant wisdom-and-practices they offer to our age of collapsing empire. But today, it is to the year 1181 and to the household of Pietro Bernardone that I would next take us.

Pietro was a wealthy cloth merchant in the city of Assisi, Italy. It came to pass that he was away from home, attending a trade fair in the south of France, when his wife gave birth to a son, naming him Giovanni. Pietro, upon his return, directed that a second name, Francesco, be added; and it was by Francesco – Francis – that the boy was thereafter known. As a youth, Francis lived ‘fast and furious’ as the saying goes, him being a rich young man in a wealthy and what-we’d-judge a degenerate environment. At age 20, when Perugia went to war with Assisi, Francis took part in the fighting and was taken prisoner. The scholar Friedrich Herr writes that

It was a spell of illness and [that] imprisonment that released [Francis’s] particular genius for seeing all things as though for the first time through the eyes of the Creator, and revealed to him that

his first duty was to cultivate a serene self-detachment from everything rooted in warfare and the perpetual commotion of the city, in fact from envy and hatred.

[Lawrence Cunningham, editor, Brother Francis, Our Sunday Visitor, Inc, 1975, p 37]

The story goes that when Francis left prison there was before him, on the roadway, a leper. Francis went to him and, kissing his hands, pressed what money he had into them. Next, Francis went to his father's shop, loaded his horse with bolts of fine cloth, rode to the next town and sold cloth plus horse in order to give that money to the priest in neighbouring San Damiano for chapel repairs. For this insolence, Francis' father took him to the bishop's court, where Francis cheerily returned everything of his to his father, taking off his very clothes, leaving the place in a cloak which the bishop's gardener had thrown away. With that cloak, supplemented by a beggar's bowl for use when there was no manual work to be found, Francis was fully equipped for his new path.

The distinction from monks since the third century was that those had sought to imitate Jesus' flight to the desert; Francis instead pursued asceticism as 'brother to the poor', embedded in the everyday life (the everyday poverty) of the world.

Francis' integrity as a lover of God, of Jesus (his standard), of all people, all nature, all creation – both cheerily so and seriously so – [this integrity] was like a breath of fresh air in thirteenth century culture, all boxed up as it was in its strife. Francis immediately attracted followers ... not that he at first intended to, but they came, eventually in the thousands. Francis preached as he went about, yes in words but more forcefully in his behaviour (in his imitation of Jesus). His message was of joy and love, of God dwelling at peace with humanity through God's Christ. With his brothers (the "friars minor" they called themselves) and the female Franciscans (known as the Poor Clares), Francis preached his

way across Italy, southern France and Spain. He preached Christ to crusading soldiers in Egypt, more profoundly he crossed the lines and preached Christ to the opposing Sultan himself, Francis having no enemies. He was against no one.

There is so much more about Francis *we benefit from*—for instance, his demonstration of Christian relationship to Creation—but let me simply summarize by quoting the scholar Lawrence Cunningham:

When Francis worked with his hands, sheltered outcasts, kissed a leper, or became a poor wanderer, it was because he had a model for this behavior. Poverty for him was not an affectation [a behaviour meant to impress]; nor was it a protest. It was an imitation of the One who shed the glory of heaven for the slavery of human existence.

[Lawrence Cunningham, Brother Francis, Our Sunday Visitor, Inc, 1975, p 20]

I don't preach about St. Francis to suggest we must become *just like him*. I *do* wish to honour all those – then, now, and before Francis – who have *such an ascetic calling* and follow it. I do wish to commend Francis' core practice of prayer (of regularly—indeed habitually—encountering the Divine)

- that is fashioned after Jesus in the wilderness, and
- that does apply to all who follow the Christ.

There *has to be*, in our life, *a wrestling*. We have both inner light and inner shadow. If we do not practice the drawing apart and the critical, reflective, contemplative exploration *by which* (i) “*recognizing the shadow*” and then (ii) “*wrestling with the shadow*” *take place*, then we are prone to self-serving and short-cuts, just like Jesus would have been if not for his desert days.

And I also wish to commend, *as ‘necessary’*, Francis' grand integrity as a **lover** of God, of Jesus (Francis' standard and our standard), [a **lover**]

of all people, all nature, all creation – both cheerily so and seriously so. Surely, this is the “breath of Holy Air / Holy Spirit” needed in our culture and across the world, all boxed up as it is in its strife.

So it is that, today, I enjoin you to a “holy season” these remaining 36 days of Lent. Amen.