

February 21, 2010

**The First Sunday in Lent**

Luke 4:1-13

All Saints', Atlanta, Georgia

*The Rev'd Geoffrey M. St. J. Hoare, rector*

Choral worship is demanding worship and not only for our combined All Saints' and Youth Choirs, for Ray and Beth Chenault, Karol Kimmel and the musicians of the orchestra. Choral worship is demanding for all of us. Choral worship at its best is not like listening to a concert. Nor is Choral worship a way of watching others do our praying for us. Choral worship demands our full attention as we hear the familiar story of our faith in a new way. The words we are accustomed to saying week in and week out have time to sink in. Choral worship is active prayer as we see where our thoughts and imaginations take us. The prayer sung by our choirs merges with the desires of our own hearts and we allow ourselves to be shaped by what is of true and ultimate worth, -- shaped by the Love that made us for Love.

In the same way, Lent as a whole is a demanding season. On Ash Wednesday we were invited to the observance of a Holy Lent by prayer, fasting, almsgiving and reading and meditating in scripture. This invitation gave rise to the old joke that Lent is the time when Episcopalians try and act like Christians, doing all the things that we ought to be doing anyway. It is one of those jokes that is OK when we tell it on ourselves but shows a lack of understanding of our way of being Christian when told by others. Our way of being Christian and of growing in our trust in God involves seasons of particular emphasis. Lent is one such season where it is not that we are being asked to do the things that we ought to be about anyway. It is that we are asked to do these things as a particular preparation for Easter, a preparation to celebrate the resurrection having really taken time to look to and be honest about who we are, beginning with the imposition of ashes and the blunt reminder of our mortality and so our dependence on God for life. In six short weeks we will be celebrating our trust in the one who offers life as a gift even out of death. If we do our spiritual work during Lent however we will not be celebrating Easter with our fingers crossed metaphorically, or with some kind of vague and wistful hope that everything will turn out all right in the end so that we can get straight back to living as though the accumulation of wealth and the avoidance of death is really what life is all about.

It is not only choral worship and the observance of Lent that is demanding for us. Our whole way of being faithful as Episcopalians is demanding. This is not to say that other paths to following Jesus may not also be demanding in some ways. But *our* way is demanding because of our fundamental recognition that God give us some measure of freedom in how we respond to any invitation to live a grace-filled life. We may on occasion find community norms that help us learn to trust God, but we don't have law that enforces a spiritual path such as the observance of Lent. Sometimes we experience the faith as a 'given' such as when we are baptized as an infant and raised in a Christian home, but however much our parents hope that we will enjoy the blessings of a life of faith for our whole lives long, the reality is that many of us will in freedom, reject that

way of life, at least for a season. Parents sometimes worry where they went wrong when their children reject the faith as adults, but we have to recognize their God-given freedom to do that. Perhaps what is worse than seeing our children reject a way of life that we believe to be fundamentally important is to see our children reject us by joining a purity sect of Christians and become considerably holier than we are. A friend of mine, who is an Episcopal priest of an emotionally and intuitively conservative stripe--the kind that suspects that I am dodgy--has a son who is a leader in a conservative breakaway group from the largely conservative Church of Christ. The Church of Christ is an American, separatist, 'Christ against Culture' denomination. On the more progressive end is the North Atlanta Church of Christ which I visited recently and from whom I think we could learn a lot. My friend's son apparently thinks those kind of Churches in his own denomination are too liberal. It is really hard for any remnant or expression of love to survive such righteousness, but my friend seems to keep on inviting relationship and suffers as everything his son perceives as his hypocrisy is pointed out to him when they get together. We all do our best and have to trust that it is enough. We create the structure for our children, share your own hopes and fears as appropriate, and recognize that in the end what we offer them is the best we know how to offer and let them find their own path trusting that God is watching out for them and finding ways to extend the invitation that we were given grace to receive and accept.

The personal freedom that we are given in faith is what makes our Episcopal way really quite demanding. Some will joke that we are 'Catholic Light' where I will argue that our emphasis on right relationship before doctrine can be at least as demanding as following any set of rules or trying to conform our beliefs to some pattern declared from above and claiming to make sense for all time.

We can find and have all the support in the world but just as birth takes a community but no one can be born in our stead; and just as new birth takes a community, in the end especially when we are raised in the Church, we can accept or reject our identity as Christians and no one else can do that for us; so living the faith that we accept, is something for which community is essential but can never substitute for our doing our own spiritual work.

Temptation of course comes to us in the form of the thinking that says what we do here really doesn't matter that much. We think that worship is something that is what we do if nothing better shows up or rather than considering fasting we imagine that trying to lose weight by giving up chocolate is a bit of a giggle. These are just other versions of the temptations that Jesus faced in the wilderness in all of which he is tempted to be less than he is, to take short cuts, to let things slide, and to compromise his integrity for the sake of what appears to be an easier way, an easier choice.

Our worship this day is reminder and invitation to take the road less traveled. Our Lenten observance is opportunity to practice the faith mindful of our mortality and the gift that is life. While our Episcopal way of living the faith year in and year out our whole life long is both preparation and practice of living with integrity towards what really matters, putting our whole trust in God's grace and love.

May a brief time of silence mark the call to pay attention in this season, to renew our commitments, to give thanks for our relative freedom and to do the work we have been given to do. Let's respond to the gospel once again in silence and in prayer...