



**GRAY'S
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March 7th (Lent) 2021

Lent or Given?

Hosea 6 : 1-6 & Matthew 4: 1-11

Lent can seem a rather negative time. Spending forty days in the wilderness, hungry and thirsty, Jesus confronts the evil of this world and is tempted to do all the wrong things. Lent is time for self-discipline and some people try to give up chocolate, or even alcohol. And the season of Lent ends up with Good Friday.

But Lent can also be an opportunity for refreshment and growth, taking us through the Cross to Easter. Certainly for Jesus it was a time when he sorted out who he was and what he needed to do. It was a time of trial, but one which led to new confidence and commitment.

In the Gospels it comes just after his baptism in the River Jordan. That had been a high, and from on high the voice saying "This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased". But straight away he finds himself in the wilderness, tempted by the devil. In each case he resists, and answers back with some clever put downs from Scripture.

In what way has Lockdown been like a time in the wilderness? A lot of us haven't done that badly. Others have faced far worse: the loss of health, the loss of income and job security, and most of all the loss of loved ones. But there has been some resonance with what Jesus experienced in the wilderness, maybe facing some of the same questions: who are you? what are you doing with your life? are you just looking for an easy way out? when the chips are down, what really matters?

Serious questions, but all the devil can do is to offer answers which are easy, superficial, escapist, risk-averse. Tricks, like turning stones into loaves of bread. Miracles, like jumping off the Temple towers. Bread and circuses to con the masses. And Control, the temptation to gain power by following the way of Satan rather than the way of God, and so a way which will avoid the Cross.

They are challenges which we also face. Who am I, deep down, and do I really dare to find out? What is God's way, and how much will we risk in order to follow it? What has true worth, and how committed are we to finding it and staying faithful to it?

At the root of Jesus' resistance to his temptations are, I suggest, two fundamental things. He knew who he was, and he knew what was what.

Jesus knew who he was. You've heard the joke: "Look at me, I'm a self-made man" – "Well it's good of you to take the blame". But we did not invent ourselves. We are created beings, given life by God. And when we messed up, he did not desert us, but in Christ gave us the possibility of a new beginning. Last time we met here we recalled George Herbert's poem: whatever we deserve, or don't deserve, whatever the shame or the blame, "Love bade me welcome". Who we are is a given, something given by God, a loved son or daughter.

This is not something that will bring health, wealth, or escape from suffering. Jesus knew that. One minute it's "This is my beloved son", the next he's cold and hungry in the wilderness. Let alone what will happen in Gethsemane. But he knew that fundamentally he was not Richard Dawkins' collection of genes and neurones, not a fly on the face of the earth, not a passing agent through time, not a plaything of the gods, not a mindless consumer.. but a beloved son. And in him, that's how we too find our true identity.

Jesus knew who he was and, second, Jesus knew what was what. He was able to resist his Temptor because he knew where true worth is to be found. Not the kind of man who Oscar Wilde described as knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing. He knew that bread is important, bread for today and bread for my neighbour, but man does not live by bread alone. He knew that power is necessary if you want to change the world, but not the kind of power which the devil distributes to those who will accept his priorities and adopt his way of force.

So maybe we too might come out of Lockdown knowing a little more about what really matters. I was aware before that much of our economy lay in the ultimately fictional world of financial services and money markets, but not that what actually did exist in real life was so dependent on pubs and nail bars. During this past year we have discovered that the people who really matter are those who work in the NHS, and the under-paid and easily forgotten staff in Care Homes. So too we have had to acknowledge the growing inequality between different neighbourhoods, classes and ethnicities.

How long will all of that last? As, please God, we emerge from our own little wilderness, are we just returning to the normal? We are told that only by rebuilding the economy can there be wealth to spare. Might we not also stop and ask, what are the goods, what are the services that really matter, and who needs them most? Or was Satan right when he boasted that “all of this is mine to give to whoever I please?”

After forty days Jesus came out of the wilderness. He had struggled but not surrendered. He had grown in faith, knowing more than ever who he was, a child of God. He had recommitted himself, for the three years that lay ahead, to God’s way, not the way of Satan, but to the things that really mattered. May our forty days of Lent help us to do the same.