

Chicken or Egg?

Why do we find ourselves with Jesus in the desert this morning?

What's going on with his encounter with the adversary of God?

This one we call Satan?

What's at stake in this seemingly God forsaken place?

At first it seems that Jesus is confronted with the three most common temptations that humans face.

Shiny beads that so often mesmerize us.

The temptation to be well fed.

"Turn this stone into bread!"

And satisfy your hunger — forever.

The temptation to be rich.

"Worship me and you'll have every kingdom in the world!"

Making you fat and happy all the days of your life.

The temptation to be famous.

"Throw yourself off the temple and God will miraculously save you!"

And people will beg for your autograph, and admire your face on the cover of People magazine.

These are the common temptations we all face in one form or another, as we muddle through this life.

As we struggle with the family budget.

As we wonder whether we'll be comfortable in retirement.

As I wring my hands over what my neighbor's thinking of me.

But what's happening in the desert isn't only about a fat belly or a fat bank account or being a famous Freddy.

The confrontation between Jesus and the devil is also about power.

The power to create bread, and therefore become a source for hungry people to be fed.

A power used to manipulate people.

To dominate them.

To enslave them.

As in the famous story of the Grand Inquisitor when Jesus returns, in a small Italian village in the 1500's.

"He comes softly, unobserved, and yet, strange to say, everyone recognizes Him."

As he sets about healing people.

Even raising a small child from the dead.

The Cardinal, the Grand Inquisitor, who enforces the rules of the faith, promptly arrests Jesus, confronting Jesus about his return:

"You offer people freedom, but we give them bread.

And people will always choose bread over freedom."

Which leads to the second temptation about power during this struggle in the desert.

The power to rule over others.

"Worship me and all of these kingdoms are yours to command."

We see this playing out tragically today in Ukraine.

A Russian dictator decides to rule over a sovereign people, and thousands needlessly die.

Third, and the most tempting power of all, the power to command God to act is offered by Satan to Jesus this morning.

"He will save you if you throw yourself down from the temple heights!"

We see this power on display in what's called the Prosperity Gospel.

That warped form of Christianity that says "God owes me!"

As one writer puts it,

"The gospel of prosperity turns Christianity into a vapid bless-me club, with a doctrine that is little more than spiritual magical thinking.

If you pray the right way, God will make you rich." Cathleen Falsani, Washington Post.

So perhaps this time in the desert isn't only about common temptations, but it's also about power.

How we seek it.

How it corrupts.

And like Jesus does with the common temptations, so he does with the temptations to power.

Jesus, because he is following a different vision, rejects these temptations.

But I think something else is playing out in the desert this morning.

Something much more profound than merely rejecting common temptations.

Something even more profound than walking away from the lure of power.

Something that is instead — cosmic.

Something fundamental to the entire fabric of creation.

Today, in the desert, that age old question, “What came first, the chicken or the egg?” — is at stake.

Not literally the chicken or the egg, but the fundamental ‘what comes first’ question.

As in, what comes first, the material world — or consciousness?

Science teaches us that it all began with a big bang.

And from that came matter.

And eventually from all that matter came us!

With our big brains.

And from our big brains — comes consciousness.

According to science, since the brain creates consciousness, when we die, our consciousness dies too.

Which is why we have wars and greed and racism and all the other evils of humanity.

Because something in us says: this is all there is!

So grab what you can while you can because it's not lasting forever!

That's Satan's view.

And thus the focus on fame, fortune and power.

But what if consciousness exists before the big bang?

What if consciousness causes the big bang?

What if consciousness creates matter?

Uses matter?

Occupies matter (like the brain) but is not constrained, controlled or limited by it?

Isn't that the great drama playing out in the desert this morning?

The devil insists that this material world is the source and summation of all life, and dares Jesus to agree.

Jesus, however, sits in the truth that this world is only a way station.

That spirit and thought and consciousness exist before, and independently of, this material world.

And will continue after all that is material is transformed into a new heaven and a new earth.

These two ways of understanding reality bring us to a fork in the road.

They set before us profoundly different ways to live life.

And it forces us to reimagine what we think our faith is all about.

Christianity has come to be seen as a private relationship with a far away God.

A God who, if I cross certain "T's" and dot certain "I's" promises I will secure a condo in the sky when I die — in the sweet bye and bye.

But that's not what Jesus is about.

"The Christian Faith is not a set of personal values or spiritual preferences.

It's a claim about the very nature of reality." Murray Rae.

That, as Paul comes to see so vividly, Jesus "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

Through him all things are created, in heaven and on earth.

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." Col. 1:15-17.

We are invited to see, through compassion and self-giving, through self-emptying, the ultimate discovery.

That all that is — is not only connected, it is indeed One.

It allows us to grasp the truth that "the cosmos is fundamentally and primarily alive ... and that Christ, through the incarnation, is rooted in the world, even in the tiniest atom." T. de Chardin.

Even in the vast expanse of interstellar space..

None other than Thomas Aquinas, the great doctor of the church, declared that in Christ, "God becomes human so that humans may become God, sharing in the divine nature."

Which, I know, is hard to believe these days.

Looking around at the world as it is often leaves us shaking our heads and wondering if anything faith says is true.

And yet, "our age and the age of the first century, when Jesus walked those dusty roads, have more in common than we think.

Both eras are cosmically scared, frightened ages, caught under principalities and powers where tiny little human beings know that they cannot do much.

That they are not in control.

That they are just trapped" Krister Stendahl. modified.

But we are not tiny little human beings.

We are created in the very image of the living God.

We are co-creators with the God who is in all things, guides all things, and loves all things.

The divine holds all things.

Gives birth to all things.

As St Nicholas of Cusa discovered, "the divine is in all things, and all things are in the divine."

This is the great drama playing out in the desert today.

It's a drama that demands an answer from us, just as it demands an answer from Jesus.

Shall we claim our inheritance as children of God?

As beloved companions of the consciousness that holds all things together?

Or shall we exchange our heritage, our destiny, for some shiny beads?

This is Lent.

What shall our answer be?

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