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# The Education of Desire

Luke 4.1-13

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on February 25, 2007 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

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I was born into a culture that was very suspicious of power. There could be lots of reasons for this. It could be because all power is said to corrupt. It could be because this was the sixties, a time when white males stopped being seen as the source of all good and started being seen by many as the cause of all evil. But I think it was because powerful people tend either to seek or find that they become the center of attention, and, in the culture in which I was raised, being the center of attention was considered very bad manners. The way to show you were well behaved was to let the other child win, never to exaggerate, and always to remember that people in Africa were having a terrible time (so one could never complain) – and, eager to please, that was exactly what I did.

The trouble with this form of good manners is that it becomes very difficult to talk about the power of God. Power seems at best a necessary evil, so one can't imagine God having any. Sure, Jesus suffers uncomplainingly, sure he stands alongside those who struggle for justice, sure he dies in agony on the cross. But the miracles and the divinity and the resurrection become a bit harder to talk about. They seem to make Jesus the center of attention. They seem somehow impolite.

But this is to make the story of Jesus no more than a genteel account of how violence and selfishness and fear always win. And this misses the heart of the gospel. The heart of the gospel is that Jesus was raised from the dead. This is a unique act of power that shows us definitively the nature of God. The resurrection of Jesus is both forward-looking and backward-looking. It gives us a new future because it means that death is not the end and shows us the eternal life that God has in store for us. And it gives us a new past because it shows that every failure and sin and catastrophe, even the cross itself, can be and has been redeemed, and so every aspect of our lives can be ransomed, healed, restored and forgiven. The cross and resurrection is the center of history because it gives us a new future and restores our past. That's the heart of the gospel.

And if cross and resurrection are the center of history, then our notion of power is transformed. What's wrong with violence is not that its weapons are too strong and they threaten to destroy God's reign but on the contrary that its weapons are too weak and they distract from where true power lies. What's wrong with injustice is not that it sets up barriers that will never be overcome but that it pathetically tries to push back the tidal wave of righteousness that will flow like a never failing stream. Violence and injustice cause untold suffering but the good news of the resurrection is that their power is as nothing before the power of God.

This is the most important part of the gospel but it's also the most difficult part. We want the gospel to end with the resurrection so we can all live happily ever after. But it doesn't end with the resurrection. It carries on. (If you think about it, if the story hadn't carried on after Jesus' resurrection it wouldn't have included you and me, which might have been rather disappointing.) Now this morning's gospel reading tells us that it isn't just us that find the existence of suffering and injustice the hardest part of the gospel. Jesus seems to have found it difficult as well.

Jesus goes into the wilderness after his baptism just as Israel went into the wilderness after crossing the Red Sea, and he goes there to find out the same thing Israel went to find out. Jesus goes into the wilderness to find out what it means to have power.

The first temptation he faces is about physical power. He's surrounded by stones and it would make life a whole lot easier if he were to turn one of them into a loaf of bread. But he doesn't. He doesn't because he's learning what it means to have power over his own body. Yes, he's hungry, but that doesn't mean he allows hunger to take over his imagination so he can't think of anything else. Yes, he could do with a coffee, but he's not going to let his body become subject to a craving for caffeine before he can embark on any form of physical effort or serious thought. Yes, he'd love a beer, but he's finding ways to relax and be cheerful and find a sense of humor without depending on a brown bottle to do it all for him. Yes, he'd love to be intimate and feel the sexual

excitement of holding somebody close, but he's here in the wilderness to learn not to be subject to the whim of lust and the sovereignty of his hormones. Yes, he's tired, but he's discovering that he can't make sleepiness a perpetual excuse for avoiding those things he doesn't want to do, and he can't make his own exhaustion a symbol of his self-importance.

What he does is to transform every desire into a desire for God. "One does not live by bread alone," says Jesus, quoting Deuteronomy, and the original verse goes on "but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." If he had bread, he'd be hungry next day. If he had a beer, he'd be thirsty again. But learning to desire the word of God, learning to feed on the bread of heaven, means he'll never be hungry again. That's power.

The second temptation Jesus faces is a political one. Here he is, out in the wilderness, a long way from making the kind of difference in Israel and the world that the angels and the magi talked about at his birth. And here is an offer of glory and authority, an offer to rule over all the kingdoms of the world. This is the chance to set right injustice, to end violence, to legislate the kingdom of God. But Jesus doesn't take the offer. He doesn't because he's learning where true power lies. Governments are important. They influence most people's lives. But one can become obsessed about public office and the personalities in the public spotlight. Just imagine what power one would discover if one set that aside for a moment. The power of wisdom, the power of truth, the power of the soil and the seas and the air and the wind and the sun, the power of ideas and the power of the imagination, the power of rhetoric and the power of knowledge. Jesus says there's one thing that's always more important than government, and that's worship. For worship directs you to where true power lies, a power that government can only envy.

Jesus transforms the desire to control into the desire to worship. Rather than be determined to be in charge of everything, Jesus reorients our gaze to the one who really is in charge. He says, again quoting Deuteronomy, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." The only true government is founded on true worship. That's power.

The third temptation Jesus faces is a supernatural one. We're all captivated by the thrill of fantasy, lured by the promise of magic, enticed by the prospect of a spectacle. That's why we're drawn to the television, sucked into the world of major league sports, and fascinated by celebrity. They each offer us an instant prospect of a magic carpet to another world of heroes and conquests and drama and delight – a world so much more entertaining than our ordinary one. But Jesus isn't interested in a fantasy world. He's not dazzled by popularity, or celebrity, or admiration, or even headline news. He's in the wilderness to learn those things that really bring change. His ministry isn't going to be about playing games with God.

Jesus takes the desire for titillation and makes it into the desire for transformation. He's not going to be distracted by the exciting, the spectacular, or the intriguing. He can't be bought off with food, he can't be fobbed off with high office, he can't be distracted by entertainment. He can't be put off from his purpose. That's power.

Only after Jesus has discovered where power truly lies is he ready to exercise his own power. Jesus discovers that there is more to wish for than simply feeding a hungry world, much as he and we would love to. Many Christians who have followed Jesus have fallen for this first temptation. But the truth is that the world whose hunger was satisfied this way would tomorrow simply be hungry again. Jesus discovers that there is more to wish for than ruling the world, much as he and we might wish to. Many Christians who have followed Jesus have fallen for this second temptation. But the truth is that governments don't finally rule the world: they come and go, while God's rule, encountered and celebrated in worship, never comes to an end. Jesus discovers that there is more to wish for than excitement and drama, much as he and we enjoy it. Many Christians who have followed Jesus have fallen for this third temptation. But the truth is such things are most often a distraction from the transformation Jesus truly brings.

The irony of course is that Jesus did feed people, by turning five loaves into food for five thousand. He does rule the world, crowned with thorns on Good Friday and throned in glory on Ascension Day. And he does employ a company of angels, to roll away the stone on Easter Day. But he only does those things after he has discovered what true power is and where true power lies. And the same goes for us. Of course we seek to feed a hungry world. Of course we seek to make a more just world through the offices of government. And of course we enjoy

bringing drama and excitement to the world through entertainment, sports and the media. But first we must discover what true power is and where true power lies.

And that is what Lent is for. Lent is for discovering what true power is and where true power lies. Discovering what true power is means educating our desires. That's the point of giving things up for Lent. Just as an athlete or soldier or musician undergoes a rigorous discipline of training to make sure they can do the right thing at the right time and never fall back on the excuse of not feeling like it or having a bad day, just so in Lent Christians discipline their bodies so they are ready to respond to God's call whenever it may come. You fast so that you learn to hear the call of God louder than the call of the refrigerator. You train your body, your senses, your imagination so you learn to do what God wants you to do rather than what advertisers or seducers or tempters want you to do. This is true power.

But true power doesn't ultimately lie in our bodies or in willpower or mental strength. True power lies in God, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, in the forgiveness and healing of the past and in the wondrous promise of an eternal future that Jesus' resurrection brings. So Lent isn't just a time for disciplining our bodies. It's also a time for reorienting our awareness to where true power lies.

While Lent is traditionally a period of forty days, I'd like you to think of four undergraduate years at university as a kind of Lent. They're also a time of preparation. They're also a time when you leave the familiarity of your home town and go to a strange place for a period to make you ready to use power. They're also a time of developing your body, mind and spirit, of learning what to desire and how, of forming disciplines and discovering wisdom and truth. Most obviously, they're a time of training for the roles and offices of responsibility and influence in society. But if this is a time for you of growing in power, make sure it's spent discovering what true power is and where true power lies. You'll never get a better opportunity.

My prayer for my undergraduate friends is this: that during these four years you become people of power – people who know what true power is and where true power lies. True power must involve becoming a person who can't be bought off with food, can't be fobbed off with high office, and can't be distracted by entertainment. True power must involve being ready for God. If you are such a person, you'll be a person of power. But true power ultimately lies not in shaping our desire for God but in realizing God's desire for us. And God's desire for us is enfleshed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This is what Lent is ultimately about, and this is what I hope your university career is ultimately about, because this is where true power ultimately lies.

May this Lent be for all of us a time for developing our own power, fostering that power in others, and meeting true power in the God of Jesus Christ. Amen.