

*Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves?*

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I want to take you back more than six months ago; back to the First Sunday in Lent; and that Gospel reading which we heard that day; the very same Gospel passage that the church has been reading on the First Sunday in Lent for nearly 1800 years.

It was, as you may recall, the story of Christ's temptations in the wilderness: that threefold battle that Christ had with Satan at the very beginning of his ministry; as he was focusing so intensely on hearing and obeying the Will of the Father; the threefold temptation to answer his great physical hunger by turning stones into bread; and to test his Father's love by throwing himself down from the pinnacle of the Temple; and to have power over all the world by falling down and worshipping Satan.

And, as you may also recall, over and over again we have seen how each of these temptations was, in one way or another, a temptation to follow a different path; a path than the one that would lead him to the Cross; an apparently easier path that would not require him to face all of the pain and agony of betrayal and death. A road easier to walk than the difficult road that the Father was calling him to walk.

And, when you think of that story of Christ doing battle with Satan, you may also recall another story of Christ doing battle with Satan; but in this second story, not with Satan directly but with Simon Peter.

Maybe you recall the occasion. It's a story that falls closer to the end of Jesus' ministry than to the beginning. Jesus is with his disciples in the northern sections of Israel; and Jesus has just asked them who they think he really is; and Simon Peter has just proclaimed his belief that Jesus is the Christ; the long-awaited Messiah.

But when Jesus then goes on to speak of his upcoming arrest and trial and crucifixion and death, Peter follows up his bold statement of faith and hope with an equally bold rebuke; telling the man whom he has just confessed to be the Christ that he must be wrong; that Peter cannot even begin to imagine how the great and mighty, long-awaited, long hoped, for Messiah, would ever face such a horrible end. Which, if you recall, prompts Jesus to turn on Peter; harshly; brutally; with words that, even now, 2000 years later, have an incredibly deep intensity and power: *get behind me, Satan!*

Now, on one level, Jesus' rebuke seems to be such a disproportionate response; far harsher than Peter's few simple words really warranted. Sure, Peter had been wrong; but hardly enough to justify being called Satan; hardly enough to justify being called the face of evil itself.

But what if Jesus, in that moment in Caesarea Philippi, isn't just responding Peter's voice? What if Peter's voice sounds all too much like another voice that Jesus has had heard before? What if, in Jesus' mind, Peter's voice is an echo of that other voice; that sinister voice; that very crafty voice; that voice that Jesus once heard in the cold dry hunger of the wilderness; a voice that tried to tell him that he should choose a different path; an easier path; a path that didn't have to lead to his betrayal and death;

a path that didn't lead to the Cross; a voice that Jesus will hear once again, not so very long after, in the garden on the night of his arrest; a voice that he had to fight with every ounce of strength that he had? A voice that tempted him to take a shortcut.

I offer all of this as a way of entering into this week's gospel: the incredibly well known, and rightly beloved, story of the Good Samaritan. I offer all of this in context. Because Luke's very carefully written story tells us that the lawyer who prompts the telling of this remarkable story comes to 'tempt' Jesus with a question: a question, as we just heard, about what he must do to inherit eternal life. And the word that Luke uses to tell us of this lawyer's desire to trip Jesus up is the very same word that Luke uses when he tells us that Satan 'tempted' Jesus in the wilderness.

Which tells me the voice of Jesus heard in the days in the wilderness, that voice that urged him to take an easier, self-serving path; the same voice that Jesus heard in Peter's words of rebuke, urging him to take an easier self-serving path; the same voice that Jesus heard in the Garden urging him to take an easier self-serving path, is perhaps the same voice that Jesus heard every day of his life. The voice that told him that the easier path would be the better path; that looking to his own interests and needs and wishes would be the best plan of all.

That, of course, is what we see in the behaviour of the priest and the Levite in Jesus' remarkable story. Who chose to walk by. To look after their own interests and needs and wishes. Maybe they had perfectly good reasons. Maybe they would have justified what they had done had they been asked. And maybe I would do exactly the same thing if I were in their place; and maybe I'd be able to make a perfectly good argument while it was the right thing for me to do. Maybe.

Perhaps that's the voice that Jesus heard in this man's question. A voice suggesting that there might be an easier way. A way to obey the law without walking the hard, difficult, demanding, path that love requires of us.

What's not in dispute in this week's Gospel is this man's understanding of the law. He knew as well as Jesus did that the law was all about love: loving God and loving our neighbours as ourselves. There was no question about that; it was all there in black and white. So the critical question in the Gospel isn't really about what love is. The critical question is about what a neighbour is. And who really deserves our love.

And perhaps that's the place where we hear the very same voice, that crafty sinister voice that Christ heard in the wilderness; and in the garden and in Peter's rebuke; and perhaps in the questions brought to him by this lawyer. A voice that tempts us to take the easier path; a voice that tempts us to cross to the other side of the road; because, you know, it's not my problem; he's not really my neighbour.

There are many voices in our very divided world that would urge us to just walk by; and sometimes they give us incredibly tempting reasons for doing so; seemingly perfectly acceptable reasons; logical reasons: they're not like us; they're only getting what they deserve; you can't help everyone. But is that voice the voice of Christ? Or is it that other voice. The one that Christ fought every day of his life. The one that we have to fight every day of our lives. That is, if we want to walk the more difficult road that Christ is calling us to walk; the more difficult road called love.