



# ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

## Episcopal Church

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Sermon for the First Sunday of Lent  
St. Mark's on the Campus  
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EVERY YEAR I'M FASCINATED BY THE WAY that the devil tempts Jesus in our readings for this First Sunday of Lent. Given how the interpretation of scripture is so debated in the church these days, I always notice the fact that the devil interprets scripture—and tries to tempt *Jesus* to interpret scripture—in a way that does not serve God. It's a caution for all of us, isn't it? How easy it is to think that simply because something is in scripture, we can pick it out and use it to buttress arguments that might or might not have anything to do with the loving grace of God as we come to know it in Jesus Christ.

I'm reminded of those churches found in the Appalachian hills that worship with snakes and drink poison, because the final section of Mark—a section which was added some time after the original gospel was written—says that the true follower of God is able to do these things and not be hurt. It makes me glad that this way of reading scripture hasn't been the *Anglican* way of reading scripture!

In addition to the way the devil tries to entice Jesus with scripture, there's also the beguiling bit of *truth* to what Satan offers Jesus. After all, Jesus IS the beloved Son; the gospel story has just told us that when Jesus is baptized: "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." The devil twists this a bit, questioning its veracity: "*IF* you are the Son of God..." he says to Jesus.

But since Jesus *is* God's beloved, what could possibly be *wrong* with Jesus having power over all the kingdoms of the earth, or providing food for his empty stomach, or even to show that he trusts completely in the God of his origin? He would use such power in the right way, and he *needs* strength to serve God, and isn't trusting God the basis of the relationship? So what's the problem?

Let's focus on that second question that the devil asks Jesus: "Then the devil lead him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.'" Wouldn't it be easy for Jesus to say, "If I had all that authority, I could use it for good, I could use it for God"? Surely part of the temptation with which Jesus struggles is that he could compromise with what is right just a little in order to achieve a greater good.

Except what good would it do if Jesus had coercive authority over the kingdoms of the earth? The way *he* exercises authority is quite different than the exercise of authority toward which he's being tempted. Jesus does not *coerce* any of us into anything. Jesus does not *force* us to receive his love. Jesus does not *insist* that we love *him* or anyone else. The loving relationships into which Jesus calls us with himself and others are freely chosen. True forgiveness, sacrifice for one another: these qualities *cannot* be coerced; they can only be offered.

Maybe the kind of authority the devil is offering Jesus is the kind of authority that imposes one's will on another—rather than participating in a way of life that is joyous, and offering that way to others. Jesus could *impose* a certain kind of life on the kingdoms of the earth, and there are probably times for all of us when that kind of rule on Jesus' part looks attractive. Then he could stop war and conflict among the peoples of the earth and fill the stomachs of the hungry.

But imposing his will is not the way of Jesus. We cannot force others to love one another, nor to love God. That way of life must emerge from the inside, not from the outside. That's the way God has created us; Jesus knows that, and he knows that the beguiling attraction of Satan's offer is finally against the created order of the universe, and therefore against God.

Maybe there's another dimension to this temptation as well. If Jesus *could* impose his will on us, then *we* would not have to struggle with what God's will *for us* is. We would not have to confront the temptations Jesus himself must confront.

But once again, that's not how we're created. Instead we're created to take that journey of discovery with God, to work out in our own lives how God is calling us to incarnate the Holy Spirit, how it's the same and how it's different than Jesus himself was called to live out the Holy Spirit in his life.

And so maybe that's another reason Jesus knows it would not be a faithful action on his part to assume the power that the devil offers him and impose his will: finding God's will for our lives is part of the human task for all of us, just as it is for Jesus himself.

And the Biblical tradition suggests that God's will is not the same in every time and place. Think of that passage from Ecclesiastes we sometimes hear read at burials:

For everything there is a season . . .  
A time to be born, a time to die;  
A time to plant, a time to pluck up what has been planted;  
A time to kill, a time to heal;  
A time to weep, a time to laugh;  
A time to mourn, a time to dance;  
A time to embrace, a time to refrain from embracing;  
A time to love, and a time to hate;  
A time for war, and a time for peace.

And think of the ancient Hebrews, called by God at one time to wander in the wilderness, at another time to settle into a land of milk and honey. And think of your own life, called

at one time to serve in one way, called at another to serve differently, even though there will no doubt be consistency from one service to the next. God's will is not the same at all times and places.

The common element is that we, the people of God, are called to worship God, and to let our worship form us so that our service is faithful to the one we worship, and so that we can discern God's will from one day to the next.

And so what is Jesus' response to the devil's offering of authority over the kingdoms of the earth if Jesus will only bow down and worship him? "It is written 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only Him.'"

The way God longs to be incarnated is not the same in every situation. We are unfaithful to the Biblical witness when we pretend that it is, and we are unfaithful to God when we try to impose ourselves on others without granting them the freedom to come to understand for themselves the way God is active in their lives and the way that God is calling them at a particular time and place.

If you've been following the news emerging from the primates meeting of the Anglican Communion this week, you know that the primates have called—at least for the time being—for an end to the consecration of gay and lesbian bishops and the authorization of blessing of same-sex unions if the Episcopal Church wishes to retain its current status in the Anglican Communion. And they are asking for a response from our House of Bishops by the end of September.

This mandate has several difficulties attached to it. First of all, it flies in the face of the Anglican tradition itself, which to this point has recognized the autonomy of the various member churches to make decisions for their own internal lives. That might be changing in the Communion, which if that's the case will be a real struggle for the church in the

United States as well as other places in the world, and for many of us who prize that characteristic of Anglicanism. How that will transpire remains to be seen.

Secondly, the polity of the Episcopal Church—the way we conduct our life together—is different from what it is in many parts of the Anglican Communion. Whereas policies in some parts of the communion are determined solely through their Bishops or even through their Archbishop alone, we in the Episcopal Church determine these issues together in General Convention, which is made up of all orders of ministry: laity, deacons, priests, and bishops. In order to get a true response from the Episcopal Church, the request rightly needs to go before General Convention, which does not meet again until 2009. The House of Bishops alone can't properly speak for the entire church. Only General Convention can.

The third problem is tied to this concept of imposed will. The church in the United States has chosen a direction it deeply believes is faithful to God's Spirit moving among us. Because some parts of the Anglican Communion don't agree, they are now telling us that it is unfaithful to incarnate the Holy Spirit in this way at this time in this place. They want to remove from this church the freedom to incarnate our faith in Jesus Christ in the way that we believe is faithful to God.

What will happen will happen. None of you will be surprised to hear me say that I believe that if we succumb to these wishes, we will betray the presence of God in brothers and sisters whom we are called to serve. We will be doing that which we knelt and confessed to God just a few days ago on Ash Wednesday: we will grieve the Holy Spirit. And Jesus will have reason to mourn the actions of His body yet again, sadly not for the first time.

As you follow the progression of events, I want to caution you to take what you hear in the media with a grain of salt. The non-Anglican media does not always understand the way we do things. Just yesterday I heard a report on National Public Radio that was filled with subtle but real inaccuracies. I encourage those of you who have internet access to listen to

the report that the Presiding Bishop made to the Church Center community on her return from the primates meeting; it's on the website of Episcopal News Service. If you are able, I also encourage you to listen to the live web cast coming up on Wednesday at 9 AM local time, when our Presiding Bishop will address the church and take questions from a live audience as well as from phone and email.

And I encourage you to make your convictions known to Bishop Burnett, who will be going to a House of Bishops meeting in a few weeks.

And most critically, I encourage you to pray. Pray deeply during this season of Lent: for the Anglican Communion and for the Holy Spirit's wisdom to fill our church's response in this current situation.

I know that the larger structures of the church often seem removed from your daily lives. However, just as we are St. Mark's on the Campus, we are also the Diocese of Nebraska, the Episcopal Church in the United States, and the Anglican Communion. And if we do not participate in the larger body which we comprise, we ourselves are culpable for decisions that are made. Our lack of participation can be a sin of omission, a thing not done, as we say in our confession.

It's always tempting to say that it's someone else's concern. But that's an abdication of our responsibility to discern the movement of God in our lives, and to determine as best we can what God's will is for us in this time and in this place, as we strive to love neighbors both near and far in the Spirit of Jesus.