

A sermon preached for the Church of the Epiphany, New York, by the Rev. Dr. J. Barrington Bates on the first Sunday in Lent, 18 February 2018.

Jesus wandering in the desert wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan: it's quite an image.

- Jesus tempted to relieve the hunger of the world, by turning stones into bread.
- Jesus tempted to demonstrate his divine power by throwing himself off a tower.
- Jesus tempted to claim all the world as his own by appeasing his enemy.

Ending hunger, demonstrating power, claiming one's kingdom – these are all very natural requests of a god-made-human, right?

An omnipotent god can surely put a stop to hunger. Such a god is certainly immune to the ill effects of natural laws, like gravity – or at least can overcome them at will. And if God were to claim the whole world as divine kingdom, wouldn't that put things right?

And yet Jesus resists all three temptations. Why do you suppose that is?

Turning stones into bread: a well-intended action, if ever there was one. And yet it also removes our responsibility to be stewards of the world's resources, and to share with others. And it sets up a relationship of dependence, not self-reliance.

Saving oneself from the injury of a fall: seems like a good idea, right? But it calls into question why one would *want* to throw oneself off a tower to begin with. It risks transforming the God we follow in love into one we fear—a God who is ready and willing to demonstrate amazing power, almost on a whim.

And claiming all the world as divine kingdom: how can this be a bad thing? Well, in the Gospel account this comes only by appeasing the one who will not be appeased, by giving in to the forces of evil, and — as the old saying goes — by getting into bed with the devil. That's not exactly what we had in mind, right?

And so Jesus resists these temptations. And so what? I mean, what about us?

Our temptations are quite different, aren't they?

Very few of us have been tempted to throw ourselves off a tall building to demonstrate our gravity-defying power (and if we were, either our tempter or us — or probably *both* — would be in need of serious psychological counseling!).

But we are tempted, right?

- Tempted to ignore injustice, to keep silent in the face of oppression
- Tempted to see ourselves as more important than others, not only as individuals but sometimes as a whole nation
- Tempted not just to eat chocolate cake during Lent, but to commit serious sin

I don't need to go into the details here, right?

We are capable of being really awful, aren't we?

But sometimes we resist.

- Sometimes we support and uphold those who work for justice, freedom, and peace.
- Sometimes we even work for justice, freedom, and peace ourselves.
- Sometimes we do the work God has given us to do, with singleness of heart, and for the common good.

We are quite capable of resisting temptation and doing the right thing. But sometimes we do *not* resist. On these occasions — and these, sadly, far from rare — we give in to those powerful urges to do something that we *know in our heart* is not right.

Things like murdering children, abusing women: we all know *in our heart* that these are wrong, correct?

Well, St. Antony of Egypt, a monk in the third and fourth centuries, may have insight to share here. Antony lived a truly ascetic life, alone, in the desert. He conquers his own fears, the rigors of his climate, and the unforgiving land's truly stingy harvest. He battles with wild beasts — both real and what we would call "imagined." And in the midst of his struggle, he shares some wisdom with his fellow monks, saying, "against one thing shall the monk continually battle, *his own heart*."¹

For Antony, the *heart* is the center of repentance, the mechanism for resisting temptation, and the place where the struggle of good over evil is worked out.

Not Satan leaving us alone, or even God helping us along. Not self-help books, or counseling, or even the sacraments — but our own heart.

That which is already a part of us. So integral to the human condition that modern biology — something Antony would *not* understand — reminds us that we cannot live without it.

And also the sign and symbol of our affections, our passions, and our faith, the heart is a kind of cipher for the whole spiritual personality, the true deep reality — or inner self — of a person. This is the heart of which Antony speaks when he cautions us: against one thing shall the Christian continually battle, our own heart.

This supreme symbol of the inner spiritual condition, this center of energy in a human being, this heart — against which each of us is continually battling....

Sometimes winning (and falling into sin), sometimes losing (and staying on the path of righteousness — or returning to it).

¹ Quoted from John A. McGuckin, "The Prayer of the Heart in Patristic and Early Byzantine Tradition" (New York: unpublished manuscript, 2002), 7. Translation by Helen Waddell, emphasis added. I am indebted to Dr. McGuckin for his cogent and succinct presentation of a Patristic understanding of the human heart.

In this heart, when purified, the mysteries of God are revealed — or so Antony taught. He removed himself to the wilderness, not so he could suffer from deprivation, but so his heart could be free from the many distractions and temptations of normal life.

So he might have:

- An *open* heart, admitting that hiding our secrets from God is but a delusion we indulge in.
- A *willing* heart, ready to hear and respond to God's holy Word.
- A *pure* heart, able to be in communion with that which is true, and good, and holy.

This heart, then, is more than a muscle that pumps blood through our veins. This heart is of high spiritual significance — just as much to us today as to Antony of Egypt so many years ago. Our hearts are created restless for God — we don't have to do anything to make it so. And God has elected the heart as the holy ground of encounter within us.

This is the place in which we find the strength to resist the powers and forces of evil.

This is the place where God works within each of us to turn us from sin to what is good.

This is the place in which we, like Jesus, encounter angels.

The heart. Let us not just be mindful of our heart this Lent, let us examine ourselves and pray for the strength we need to do the right thing.

The heart is what allows us not only to resist the temptations of this world, but also — and *much more importantly* — to perfectly love God, and worthily magnify God's holy name. Amen.