



Prayerful Listeners

a reflection for Lent

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting for forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.

[Matthew 4:1-2]

The idea of giving something up for Lent is hardly a new one - and indeed many would connect this tradition with the experience of Jesus during his time in the wilderness, It is those forty days of self-denial and resisting temptation that are the backdrop to today's forty-day anticipation of the events of the cross and resurrection. But does the idea of "giving things up" potentially miss the point of Lent? "Giving things up" is largely a matter of will-power; we know they are bad for us; we recognise them as indulgent and so we set ourselves the virtuous discipline of doing without. We do our best to resist the "pull" of the material and self-satisfying in order to focus ourselves on things altogether more spiritual.

But the temptations of Jesus seemed to be less about somehow departing from his spiritual vocation as working out how it would be fulfilled. This is temptation of an altogether more subtle kind. It was an "end justifies the means" kind of temptation - even propped up with the odd Bible verse, taken out of context and used to prove a pre-determined point, rather than inform and illuminate a genuinely open mind. Is this the kind of temptation that we more easily succumb to as a community of God's people?

Jesus could have achieved Messiahship by any of the means that the tempter set before him. Turning stones into bread, he could have become a corporate problem-solver on a scale never before seen; looking after himself and his own and enjoying a tide of popularity. With no less effect, he could have been the great entertainer - leaping from the temple tower, only to emerge unscathed to satisfy the expectations of those who simply wanted a crowd-drawing faith that "keeps the customer satisfied". Or he could have taken his place in the corridors of power by getting in with the movers and shapers of the day; making himself available to fulfil the agendas of the political and ruling classes; making friends in high places and enjoying the prestige, influence and status that goes with it.

Through all of these means, he could have written his place in history and found a platform on which to proclaim his message. All of these could have achieved his end, and had he embarked upon any of them, he could have no doubt beseeched his Father with a barrage of prayers that sought their success. But this was not the way of God's Kingdom and nor was it to be the path that Jesus followed. His prayers were not an opportunity to achieve divine endorsement for earth-formed plans, but to allow those plans to be defined by a Father's will.

Jesus' experience in the desert, offers us a glimpse of what lies at the very heart of our Prayerful Listeners theme. It is a recognition that in a similar way, we too can become driven by the agendas of expediency, popularity and self-indulgence. Faced with the hardship of our own "desert places," we can all too easily assume that God's only response will be to draw us back to situations of comfort and security. Our prayers can simply become a narrative that seeks such ends, that can generate waves of disappointment if they are not "answered".

It was the Spirit that led Jesus to the desert - Jesus' obedience to the Spirit left him parched and famished. Tempted to pray for "success" in the way the world around him defined it, Jesus instead teaches us to listen for what God has to say in the midst of our anguish and struggle.

"Prayerful Listeners" is a similar invitation to listen for God's voice in every circumstance; to resist the temptation of simply pursuing the easy and obvious options that we then ask God to "bless with success". It is about holding our traditions and routines afresh to God's scrutiny and exploring how together we truly become a people who are led by God's Spirit.

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A stylized orange heartbeat line graphic that starts with a vertical line, followed by a series of peaks and troughs, resembling an ECG trace.