

I have stopped ordering tea at cafes. This is not a Lenten discipline I've taken up, it's something I haven't done for years because there's nowhere in America, in my experience, actually serves a proper cup of tea. I've been to the poshest hotels you have and ordered, so-called, English tea, and what comes is a cup with a Lipton's tea bag in and a pot of lukewarm water. You just can't make a decent cuppa that way. So now I order coffee. You go into the cafe. I'm used to that long list of options, Americano, filter coffee, cappuccino, mocha, Mexican mocha, the list goes on. I've worked out, I just go in and say, "I'd like a filter coffee, please." To which they'll reply, "Hot or cold?" I'll say "Hot." "Decaf or caffeinated?" I'll say, "Caffeinated." "Cream or sugar?" I'll say, "Just cream." "And what kind of cream would you like? Almond milk, rice milk, skim milk, whole milk, oat milk?" Sometimes a simple act of ordering a cup of coffee can sound...well it turns into a bit of an interrogation. All you want is a coffee. All these questions, all these choices that you are forced to make just to get a hot beverage!

Now, I say all this because Lent is a time to think about choices. Not simple choices like what kind of coffee to have or how to have it, but life's big choices. Those are the things we are called to reflect upon in the Lenten season. And the story of Lent and Easter, that we're entering into now, that season, it's a story made up of choices.

We begin with the Gospel set for today. We always have, the first Sunday of Lent, the story of Jesus's temptation in the wilderness. It all happens, especially in this Gospel of Mark, very quick fire. In just a few verses, we go from Jesus's baptism to his temptation, to the beginning of his preaching ministry. Boom, boom, boom. One after the other. And the transition from the baptism to the temptation of Jesus seems particularly abrupt. No sooner has the Heavenly Father said to Jesus, this is my beloved son, in whom I'm well pleased, then we're told, the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. Immediately the Spirit drove Jesus. No time to savor the moment there. And the word that's used here for drove is very interesting, it is the same word that's used in the gospel when Jesus casts out an evil spirit from someone. He drives out the spirit. That's what's happening here. The spirit drives Jesus into the

wilderness. It's as if he's thrust out into the wilderness. Whatever word is used, the point is to show that Jesus had no choice when it comes to going into the wilderness. He was thrust there. He was driven there. He was pushed.

Jesus did not choose the wilderness. None of us choose the wilderness. None of us choose the wilderness experiences of our lives. We don't volunteer for pain or loss or anger or terror, but the wilderness happens anyway. Whatever guise it comes to us in, be it a broken relationship, a frightening hospital stay, a hurting child, a loss of faith, the wilderness appears in our lives, unbidden, uninvited. And sometimes it's God's Spirit that drives us there. Does this mean that God wills bad things to happen to us or chooses, he wants us to suffer? No, I don't think so. But I do think it means that God is always ready to teach, shape, mold us, and redeem us, even during the most barren periods of our lives. In the startling economy of God, even a dangerous desert can become holy. Even our wilderness wanderings can reveal the divine. Not because God takes pleasure in our pain, but because we live in a chaotic, fragile, and broken world, which includes deserts, and because God's way is to take the shadow of death, redeem them, and make them an opportunity for resurrection.

Jesus didn't choose to go into the wilderness, but when he got there, he made a number of very significant choices. We are never completely stripped of our power to choose. We might feel that life just happens to us, that everything happens as a result, well, because the universe wills it or it was fate or whatever. But that's not actually the case. There's a brilliant book many people will be familiar with by Viktor Frankl, called *Man's Search for Meaning*, which, if it was written today, would have a more inclusive title. But put that to one side. He wrote it after his experience in the Holocaust, he was in one of the concentration camps. which it looked as if first sight, as if the people there had been stripped of everything. But Frankl realized that what couldn't be taken from him or the others in the camp was the way he was to respond to that dreadful situation. He could not be stripped of the power to choose. He wrote this, "Everything can be taken from a man, but one thing, the last of the human freedoms to choose

one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." We always have the power to choose. In fact, we are defined by our choices. This, we see, was true of Jesus in the wilderness. We know from other gospels that Satan came to him and tempted him, and the temptations took the form of various choices. Satan invited Jesus to turn stone into bread, but Jesus chose not to. Satan then invited him to prove that he was the Son of God by throwing himself off a high building. Jesus declined that offer too. Then there was a third choice. Satan said, "Choose to worship me, and the whole splendor of the world is yours." Again, Jesus decided against it. And as we see the Easter story unfold, as we journey through this Lent, we'll see the choices that Jesus made that first Easter.

Think about the events of Maundy Thursday, on that day we remember Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. And Jesus prayed earnestly to his Father, "Take this cup from me. Not what I want, but what you want," he prayed. He chose the path of suffering, the hard path that led to the redemption of the world. Think of Good Friday, when Jesus was brought before Pontius Pilate, who seemed inclined to let him go because that was politically expedient. But Jesus chose to make no defense. He chose not to answer Pilate's questions. Jesus didn't drift towards the cross. Neither was He the actor in some sort of divinely written play. Jesus was crucified because he chose to win our salvation.

I once...and this is the only time I've had to do this. I once had to walk through a picket line to see a film. The picket line was made up of very earnest nuns waving placards, telling me that I'd be eternally damned if I saw this film. Well, I ran the gauntlet anyway and went to see the film. It was called *The Last Temptation of Christ*. It was a long time ago. You may remember it. Based on a famous book. And the premise of the book is that an angel comes to Jesus when he's on the cross with one last temptation, come down from the cross and live a normal domestic life. Forget all this Messiah rubbish, just live a normal life. Now, that's not in the Bible, which is why the nuns perhaps were protesting. But it seemed to me to be a perfectly legitimate premise for a story, because Jesus was tempted. It's clear from the gospels that he did face real choices. His humanity

was tested, but he chose to walk the way of the cross. As they say, it wasn't the nails that held him there, it was love. It was his desire to win our salvation. Jesus knew that God's plan of salvation involved this loving but perfect demonstration of the limitless power of divine love.

The Lenten and Easter stories are all about the choices that Jesus made. As we seek to follow his way of the cross, let's use this season of Lent to examine the choices we make. As I mentioned last week, we can choose what we do with our time. And I invite you to join me in my Lenten practice of spending a few minutes each day praying with a Psalm of praise that we might learn the vocabulary of praising God from those great examples. And I've picked out, as I mentioned last week, seven Psalms to pray with that are listed in the bulletin.

Maybe there are areas of our life in which we feel we don't have a choice, and maybe that's not the case. Maybe there are choices that could be made. Sometimes it suits us to say, "Well, there's nothing I can do about it. I don't have a choice." That's more comfortable sometimes than recognizing we make a choice. Perhaps there are choices we've made that we might want to re-examine, and there could be situations where we've made a choice without really consciously recognizing that. Lent is a time of reflection to examine our choices. Let's choose to walk the way of Jesus, the way of love. Amen.