



St. Alban's, Davidson, North Carolina, has sparked another controversy as we Episcopalians seem so wont to do.<sup>1</sup>

Last week, a statue was placed on a bench outside the parish. From a distance, the statue appears to be a person sleeping on the bench- wrapped in a blanket with face covered and feet sticking out. It's the feet that give a clue to the meaning of the sculpture. Up close, you can see that the feet are pierced. The homeless person is Jesus.

There is room on the bench for someone to sit alongside. The rector, David Buck, finds the sculpture beautiful and a reminder that Jesus calls us to care for the least amongst us. But at least one neighbor says "that's not who Jesus is. Jesus is not a vagrant. Jesus is not a person who needs our help."

The season of Lent is an opportunity for us to reflect on who Jesus is as we understand him. Is he a homeless person? Yes, in the sense that he had no home of his own. Jesus reminds us in the Gospel of Luke (9:58) that the Son of Man has no place to lay his head. No, in the sense that he was at home everywhere and friends and family often gave him lodging. Obviously, I disagree with the neighbor who finds the statue offensive and says it does not reflect who Jesus is. So, disagreements and differing understandings about Jesus and what Jesus calls us to do still exist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Good people of faith simply disagree and it's ok. What's important is that the neighbor's position asks me to reflect upon my own –our own- understanding and position about who Jesus is, what Jesus wants us to be and whether we are part of making God's kingdom a reality upon earth.

Lent is a period deliberately and intentionally set aside for us to reflect upon our relationship with God and with our culture. On Ash Wednesday, the passage from Matthew that we read makes this clear: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but rather, store up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moths nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Mt. 6:19-21). If you had 20 minutes to leave your house because a fire or flood was approaching and evacuation was mandatory, what would you choose to take with you? Think about that- really think about that- and you may get a better sense of where your heart truly is. You may get a better sense of what matters to you. Time after time in news stories following such disasters, people will acknowledge that they lost precious things- photos or documents that can't be replicated or the quilt that great-grandmother made. And yet, and you've heard it I know, people will be teary and upset about those losses while saying "but we got out safe. Everything else doesn't really matter." It's people and relationships that matter, not things.

In today's Gospel, Jesus has been driven out into the wilderness to think, pray and fast. Where is he going now that he has been baptized? What shape will his ministry take now that he is in the public eye? What will he value during his remaining time on earth? The questions were likely

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<sup>1</sup> <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2014/02/28/homeless-jesus-statue-sparking-debate/> (March 8, 2014)

fast and furious – more questions than answers. Perhaps that is why Jesus asked his disciples, and he continues to ask us, eight questions for every question he answered at least according to some scholars who have taken the time to parse through the Gospels in quest of a question-to-answer ratio. The questions help shape our outlook. The questions and our response to them shape our life and our ministry. The questions and our response tell us pretty clearly what we really value.

Lent is a time of testing, of temptation and of dilemma. You probably know what a test is and what a temptation is. A dilemma is a choice between two goods. You must choose one and each has positive outcomes. But you must choose one and so the other good goes by the wayside.

The devil approaches Jesus with three temptations. Jesus responds staying true to his call, or as one commentator put it- Jesus stays true to God. Jesus recognizes that what the devil is offering is transitory and would distance Jesus from God. One definition of sin is anything which separates us from God. Jesus saying “yes” to the temptation presented by the devil would have placed a distance between Jesus and God.

Our response to temptations- large and small- reveals our essential character. Do we acknowledge that we face a temptation? What sources and resources do we use to respond to the temptation? I suspect most of us are not as well-versed as some of our Christian brothers and sisters in being able to quote specific Bible verses back at our tempter but I hope we can at least respond in ways that are consistent with the teachings of the Bible.

Patrick Willson writes that “Jesus refused to be who we want him to be. Jesus remains steadfastly God’s.”<sup>2</sup> Our responses to temptations, and there are many of them, tells the world a lot about what we value. Do we value what moth and rust consume or thieves may rob? Or do we value human relationships, caring for each other and for the least among us? And, if that statue was placed on a bench in front of St. John’s, would we be comfortable with it and how would we explain what it means to us? These are good questions to reflect upon during Lent.

Temptations are distractions that can lead us astray from our mission to love God and love neighbor. We won’t ever have a life that doesn’t include distractions and temptations- some days more than others. What we can have, and Lent can help us develop the skills and talents, is a mission and a purpose to live as beloved children of God. Children of God that can embrace a statue that some find offensive. Children of God who follow in the footsteps of Jesus who walks with us and beside us when temptation happens.

The Great Litany with which we began our service today gives us petitions or prayers to help us when facing temptation. We beseech God to deliver us, to have mercy upon us, to hear us and to grant us peace. The good news is that God, through Jesus in fact delivers us, has mercy upon us, hears us, and if we will accept it, God grants us peace.

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<sup>2</sup> Patrick Willson in Feasting on the Word. Year A, volume 2. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 47-49.