

# *what will you give up for lent?*

a sermon preached on the  
*first sunday in lent*

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at

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ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16, Romans 10:8b-13, Luke 4: 1-15

Here we are again, in the early days of Lent. I wonder how you are preparing to observe this great season of penitence? Tradition calls us to fasting, prayer and alms giving. I would say that for most of us the focus is on some version of fasting – to give something up.

To be honest with you, I have always found this practice isolating and a bit futile – maybe because I am not strong enough to go the distance. But increasingly I think it is because I find the self-centeredness of it runs a bit awry from our call to community and loving service. It can end up looking more like food fads or some of those self-help pop-spiritualities.

Now, you could argue against me by referring to Jesus' regular habit of removing himself from day to day life for periods of prayer and reflection – as he did at the commencement of his ministry in the wilderness.

We know he was hungry from having not eaten and this reading for the first Sunday of Lent has been chosen, presumably, to signal a time of abstinence. Our tradition has taken it up as a period of personal self-denial on the basis of this one sentence saying Jesus ate nothing and was famished. But I want to examine the somewhat more textured and complex account of what he did when he returned.

When, after the forty days, Jesus encounters the devil he is tempted four times. Each of these temptations, I believe look ahead to the shape and purpose of his ministry to come. And I am reminded that Jesus' method of teaching to his disciples was, amongst other things, by example that we should follow.

First, he is invited to make bread from a stone – it is an invitation to perform a miracle, it is also to try to acquire something that had great material and spiritual significance from something that is relatively worthless and without doing valuable work. This would have been a corrupt and unnatural thing to do. It would offend God's creation just to satisfy a personal desire.

Next he was invited to take on glory and power over worldly kingdoms – pointless, he already has power over the kingdoms, if he wanted to use it, the power and the authority the devil tempted him with was empty and could not build the kind of community he had come for.

He was then tempted to worship the devil himself as a god that is not God, something Jesus—who was God made flesh—could not logically do because it would deny his own Godliness.

And last he was tempted to treat God as less than God by expecting God to intervene in the mundane and substitute for what would have been his own foolishness - for temporal convenience.

Each temptation points to something that lies outside Jesus' self – to the unity of creation, to community, to God manifest in the world and last to God in all God's forms. How might we think of about a period of fasting and introspection in the light of Jesus' response to his temptation?

Instead of looking inward Jesus' responses point outward to how Jesus engages with God and with the world. The denials they point to are not about self-denial for the sake of the self, but denial for the sake of others – to share wealth, to share power and authority, not to make worldly things objects of worship, and find a mature response to God. This is much more challenging than changing eating habits for a few weeks. It critiques our tendency for simplistic fasting and calls for something more profound, more life-giving, more outside the confines of our own worlds.

Last Monday I did something uncharacteristic for me – I went to the '#Let Them Stay' protest rally at the State Library organised for children in mandatory detention. Leaving aside the cause that prompted that protest, I was struck by the high profile accorded to the churches. I think just about every speaker, most of whom were not from a church, paid tribute to the example set by the churches in the last week or so by offering sanctuary to refugees. Most notable of whom was the Dean of Brisbane, Peter Catt. And each mention of the churches drew loud, unexpected applause from the crowds.

Like Jesus refusing the temptations of the devil, the example given in offering sanctuary forces us to look at the world and our place in it differently, by its example, it has changed the grounds of the debate, and it flies in the face of conventional public opinion – and, as David Marr observed in the *Guardian* this week, has begun to change it, at last.

The church on this occasion has looked outside of itself, beyond its day-to-day concerns – like painting the doors and fixing the windows – for a much more important thing – humanity. The church and some leaders like Peter Catt have emptied themselves of their own concerns, done a good thing, a right thing, accepting the cost even, potentially as Peter Catt remarked, imprisonment. The secular community has observed these acts of selflessness and found them courageous.

They condemn church leaders who argued for following the government's preferred 'legal' path, or who claimed practical difficulties in offering sanctuary – those leaders have had regard for themselves and opted for social safety, they have been tempted by the world and aligned themselves with it. They do not resemble Catt or Christ at all.

Last year Pope Francis in one of his Lenten messages quoted this from St John Chrysostom: “No act of virtue can be great if it is not followed by advantage for others. So, no matter how much time you spend fasting, no matter how much you sleep on a hard floor and eat ashes and sigh continually, if you do no good to others, you do nothing great.”

Francis suggested we give up indifference for Lent.