

## First Sunday in Lent

*Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert for forty days to be tempted by the devil.*

Luke 4, 1-13



Let me begin this reflection with a story adapted from *The Three Questions*, a fable written by Tolstoy. (You can find the unabridged version in almost any edited collection of Tolstoy's *Fables and Fairy Tales*.)

There was once a king who set his heart on being a wise and just ruler. He summoned the best minds in the kingdom to advise him, but was dissatisfied with the answers he received to the questions he put to them. Then the king heard of an old hermit who had a reputation for holiness and wisdom. Accompanied by a group of his knights, the king set out for the hermit's hut. When they got near, the king directed his men to remain behind. He then put on a commoner's cloak and walked alone the remaining distance to the hermitage. He found the hermit digging in the garden and, after greeting him, said: "I have come to you, wise man, to ask you three questions: How can I learn to do the right thing at the right time? Who are the people I most need and to whom should I pay most attention? And how can I know what is the right thing to do?"

The hermit listened, but said nothing in reply. He just went on with his digging. The king quickly realised that the work was heavy for the frail, old man and offered to help. Without a word, the hermit passed him the shovel and the king took over the work of digging a new garden bed. As he dug, he repeated his questions but was

interrupted by the arrival of a man who came stumbling up the path to the hermitage calling for help. Blood was flowing profusely from a gash in the newcomer's stomach and the king and the hermit caught him just as he collapsed. They carried him inside the hut, washed and dressed his wound and gave him cool water to drink. The injured man then fell into a deep sleep. The next morning he awoke as his bandage was being changed and recognised that the one who was doing it was the king.

"Forgive me, my lord," he said, trembling. "Forgive you? For what?", the king asked. "I am your enemy," the man explained. "In an uprising against you, you killed my brother and seized our lands. I followed you here intending to kill you, but as I approached the hermitage, your men recognised me and wounded me as I made my escape. I surely would have bled to death had you not attended to me. I owe you my life and am now prepared to serve you for the rest of my days."

Deeply moved at this disclosure by an old enemy, the king forgave the man and promised to restore his land to him. He then went and summoned his knights and ordered them to take the injured man back to the castle where he would receive proper care.

The king then turned to the hermit again and, once more, put to him his three questions. The hermit simply replied: "You have already answered them for yourself." "How? When?" the king asked, perplexed.

"Don't you realise that if you had not pitied me yesterday and taken over digging my garden beds, you would have gone on your way and been ambushed and killed. So, the most important time was when you were digging in the garden. I was the most important person and the good you did for me was the most important thing to do. Later, when that man came up bleeding to death, if you had not cared for him, he would have died without making his peace with you. He was the most important person, what you did for him was the most important thing and when you did it was the right time. Always remember that the most important time is now, because the present is the only time we have control of. The most important person is the one in need. The most important thing to be done is to reach out and do good for the one in need. It is for that purpose alone that God has put each of us into this life."

In today's gospel, Jesus is also confronted with three questions: Will he use his power for his own gratification and acclaim or to do what he believes God wants of him? Will he compromise the values of God in order to accommodate popular expectations? Will he try to discern what God wants, or slip into rationalising, doing what he wants and calling it God's will? It was during his lonely ordeal in the wilderness that Jesus decided what his vocation in life was to be. He knew in his heart that it was to be involved in doing the work of God. The very same Spirit who led Jesus into the wilderness is the one who prompts us to explore similar questions: to search to understand who we are and who we want to become; to choose how to live with integrity, honesty and compassion as we make our way through life. As Jesus was "tempted" and as the king sought answers to his questions about leadership and justice and wisdom, so are we confronted with choices and decisions and goals that life puts before us. If we are open to listening with our hearts, God's Spirit will also guide us to discover the answers in our very midst.