

TESTED AS WE ARE

A Sermon for Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2010

Text: Hebrews 4:15-16

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

“Tested as we are”? Not “tempted as we are”?

The King James Version, the Good News Bible, the Revised Standard Version, the New International Version—when they translate this verse from Hebrews, they all say that Jesus is our high priest who in every respect has been “tempted” as we are, yet without sin.

I’m not sure why the *New Revised Standard Version* uses a different word. It says Jesus was “tested” in every respect as we are.

I like it. I think that for the season of Lent I’m going to try to avoid the word “temptation,” and use “testing” instead. Because “temptation” has come to have such a narrow and special meaning, I fear that it is losing its more fundamental significance. We have isolated certain temptations and set them aside as a special category of things which it is possible to avoid as long as you stay out of those areas. Don’t steer your grocery cart down the cookie aisle, for example.

But in fact you and I are subject to *testing* all the time! In *every* area of our life. Our ability to be full and free and loving and faithful people is disputed. Who knows when we are going to let others down, or let ourselves down? In our Gospel reading, Jesus criticizes some of the best behaviors of the nicest people—fasting, praying, sharing alms—and finds them wanting.

The point of testing is to discover the strength of our faith in God and our love for one another. Since we are *in all things* supposed to trust God and love our neighbor, how can we ever escape the “tester”? Everything we do is subject to scrutiny. At any moment one might ask “Does what I am doing and the way I am doing it pass the test of faithfulness to God and my neighbor?” Or, “am I being true to God, who expects me to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly before him?”

Think of “test” the way it is used when talking about fishing line. “20-pound test” line is able to pull in a 10-pound trout without breaking. It would probably not bring in a shark or a marlin, but it’s not meant to.

Think of the Christian life, think of human life, as subject to strains and stresses which test our ability to be . . . well, good. And not just good in an individualistic sense, but good for our

community, good for the world, good for God. The strain of being a good human is a very public strain. Most of our failures are better known to others than to ourselves.

The letter to the Hebrews makes the claim that Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, is uniquely qualified to be our savior, our high priest, partly because he is just like us. He was made to me just like us, and he was subject to the same sort of strains and stresses that we are subject to. Without breaking, as you and I are wont to do.

We have a high priest who *in every respect* has been tested as we are, yet without sin. A remarkable claim.

During our midweek Lenten services this year, starting next Wednesday, I plan to lift up some of the strains that are put on us as people, which, well, we could perhaps handle better. We strive for things we need: a place to be at home; friends and companions; truth and sincerity; dignity; and finally, righteousness—or, to be right. These are only a sample of the things we need, things we seek, things we value, but which sometimes we are short of.

As I look at Jesus going through the events of what we call Holy Week, I see a human being, one who (according to Hebrews 2:17) is like us in every respect, who was subjected to great strain not just at the moment of his crucifixion, but all week long. It is hard to be a good person, a full person, a free and complete person, and it was hard that week for Jesus, because he was just like us. I will suggest how what he suffered that week reflects the difficulties in our own lives, and I hope you and I will see a brother who was torn as we are often torn, who needed what we need, one who is fully human partly because he *was* tested as we are tested.

That Jesus was tested as we get tested is good news for us, ultimately, because he is also the Son of God, our Savior. So the gifts that he gives us of forgiveness and peace and strength and freedom are gifts he knows about from being on our side. He was tested as we are, criticized, and ultimately discarded by the world—yet his suffering was not for his sake but for ours. That is the right person for us to walk beside, as we go through Lent to Good Friday and Easter.

Amen.