

Lent One

February 10, 2008

O God be in my mouth as I speak for you and fill this place with your great grace, that we may leave this place less of what we used to be...and more of what we ought to be, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

I have a Lenten confession to make.

In election years, I am complete political junkie.

I love watching election returns, campaign analysis, and the debates that pepper Fox and CNN.

I know what you are thinking. Most of you are tired of it all or cynical about the whole process.

But as Americans we occasionally need an outsider to help us put things in perspective. I was having dinner with a priest from Pakistan a few weeks ago.

He told me that Americans are lucky to have the system they have, even with all its flaws. He said in Pakistan they have a saying about political elections.

He told me when people say they are having a general election they just wonder what type of general they are going to get.

So for all the cynics among you beware, things could be worse.

Now, another intriguing part of the recent primary campaign is the various slogans our candidates use to try and gain our support.

As a priest though, my interest in slogans does not arise because I feel strongly about any one candidate. You won't see any bumper stickers on my Toyota.

However as a theologian, I find that popular political slogans generally tell us more about ourselves than the candidates.

It is less about them and more about what appeals to us.

Political slogans give us insight into our deepest fears.

In a brief phrase or simple words they try and capture our hopes for an uncertain future in a dangerous world.

This sense of fear and uncertainty is articulated well in the candidate who used the slogan, “Ready to lead on Day One.”

For others though in our presidential race, the word “Change” seems to be the most popular theme.

One candidate is “Ready for Change”.

Another one promotes, “Change we can believe in”.

This whole emphasis on change seems appropriate since Lent started this past Ash Wednesday.

Next to making New Year’s resolution to lose ten pounds or go to the gym, Ash Wednesday is for Christians the number one day, when we tell ourselves that we are ready to make a change in our lives.

This notion of change also got me thinking about the spiritual implications of our candidates’ slogans.

If I am being honest, Am I really “*Ready for Change*” in the Lenten season? Do I even want it?

Probably not.

As an Episcopalian, something in my DNA instinctively rebels against the whole notion of change. I always liked the old light bulb better.

Why can’t things like the liturgy or hymns just stay the same?

Change is difficult. It can be messy.

How many of us are truly serious about rolling up our sleeves and getting down to

the hard Lenten work of changing our lives?

Becoming that person that “we truly ought to be”, made in God’s image and redeemed from a life of sin. Are we ready for that?

Now, the other slogan is bit more puzzling. *Change we can believe in.*

Does this imply that most human change is just superficial?

Does this mean that when celebrities or athletes confess their faults, and tell us they have been saved and are going to make changes, we know they aren’t being serious?

Instead, most of us think they are listening to their public relation advisers and trying to salvage their Nike contracts.

“Change we can believe in” suggests to me that most of us don’t really believe in what is being offered to us.

And this is a problem you see in the gospels all the time.

People were reluctant to believe Jesus’ message about God’s love.

Jesus told people that God was ready to free them from slavery of sin, heal their broken relationships, addictions and their alienation from God.

Jesus came as it says in Luke’s Gospel to announce a brand new year of the Lord’s favor.

On Palm Sunday, we see Jesus greeted outside Jerusalem with political slogans of “Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”, and “Hail to the king of Israel”.

And yet despite these popular slogans, in one short week, Jesus was hanging on

the cross.

Jesus offered change that most folks just weren't ready to believe in.

They didn't believe that God was really that good, that loving and forgiving.

They couldn't believe that God was like the father of the prodigal ready to slaughter the fatted calf for a feast and celebrate his homecoming.

In fact this inability to accept God's goodness is a key theme of the confrontation that Jesus has with Satan in our Gospel lesson.

Satan just doesn't buy the message that Jesus is selling. Satan's relationship with God is based on fear, manipulation, and power.

Satan tells Jesus, "Change these stones to bread, throw yourself off this building, bow down and worship me and I will give you power".

"Come on Jesus, don't kid me about this goodness of God, worship yourself, because that is what all leaders (despite their slogans) eventually do.

Jesus will have none of this. He is just as adept at quoting scripture as Satan and more than willing to remind him that God really is that good.

God wants change that people can really believe in.

And part of the church's task is to preach a Lenten message of invitation.

To remind people in this forty-day season, they have a new opportunity in their broken lives to learn about the power of God's life-changing love.

Satan doesn't want us to change. He wants to keep us where we are, living a half

fulfilled life of unrealized expectation and empty promises.

C.S. Lewis captured this in his book *The Screwtape Letters*, which are a fictional correspondence between a junior and senior devil.

Screwtap, the senior devil, describes his patients who on arriving in hell, said, “I now see that I spent most of my life in doing neither what I ought nor what I liked.

The Christians describe the enemy as one “without whom Nothing is strong”. And Nothing is very strong; strong enough to steal away a man’s best years not in sweet sins but in the dreary flickering of the mind over it knows no what and knows not why in the gratification of curiosities so feeble that the man is only half aware of them....you will say these are very small sins...but do remember the only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the enemy(God)...Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turning, without milestones, without signposts.

Change that we truly believe in, is threatening to Satan’s dominion because it represents the end of the tempter’s influence over our lives.

In closing though, let me return to my earlier focus on campaign slogans.

To be honest, the only one that really resonated with me for Lent was the one that said, “Change begins with us”.

In our story, Satan tempts our Lord to change God. Make God do *this or that* to demonstrate power.

The power though that Satan fears is the confession of our dependence on God alone.

That is the moment when change starts for you and for me.

It begins with us.

This simple confession is best exemplified in the prodigal story when the young person says, “I will arise, go to my father and say I have sinned against heaven and you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son or daughter”.

Lent is the time that we can each start that long walk back home.

Where we will not be greeted with empty slogans, but a heartfelt welcome from a God who loves us.

A God who is waiting, willing, and ready to welcome us back home.