

## **First Sunday of Lent**

**St Mary's, Barnes, 2017**

### **Richard Harries**

The culture which we inhabit today has, sadly, trivialised the concept of temptation. The reality however, is deadly serious. It is fundamental to our faith that we are free, within however narrow limits, to make genuine choices. Sometimes those choices are between what is good and what is less than good, and what is less than good can take on the energy of what we term evil, and this can lure or draw us. When psychology, sociology and the other disciplines have given all their explanations about our behaviour there is still the eternal struggle of good and evil.

As Christians we can easily fall into the trap of thinking that because Christ was the Son of God the struggle was somehow easier for him: on the contrary it was infinitely more difficult. He was tempted, or tested, the Greek word is the same, with an intensity we cannot imagine but into which today's Gospel reading gives us a fascinating glimpse.

When Christianity became official in the 4<sup>th</sup> century some Christians, discouraged by the new laxity went into the Egyptian desert. This was not so much to escape the world but to be at the front line in that struggle of good and evil. For it is when you are on your own that you have to face those inner demons, as the desert fathers reveal in the wisdom they gave to those who sought them out for advice. So Christ goes into the wilderness. The Gospel begins "Jesus was then led by the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." We note that this inner ordeal is within the purview and providence of the Spirit. What it means is that whatever we may be going through, or however we are being tested, or whatever we may be feeling the Holy Spirit is with us.

Jesus fasted for forty days. The forty is of course a reference to the forty years in which the people of Israel were tested in the wilderness and all the words which Jesus uses to reject the wiles of evil are drawn from a passage in the Book of Deuteronomy referring to that forty years. Jesus recapitulates and focuses in his own person that testing of the people. There is also a subsidiary reference to the 40 days Moses spent on the Mountain when he received the Divine law, because for Matthew Jesus is also the new Moses who brings his people a new law and a new freedom. The first two temptations begin with the phrase “If you are the Son of God”. The Gospel had just recounted the baptism of Jesus in which he heard the words “This is my beloved son in whom I take delight”. But what did that mean in practice? Deuteronomy recounts how God gave manna to his people in the wilderness, surely now he could turn stones to bread? Yes, but would it be right to use his divine power in this way? Deuteronomy also says “Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” It was not the word of God to use his power for personal ends.

Then in his mind’s eye Jesus was taken to the terrace of the great temple which stood 150 feet above the Kedron valley. Surely if he threw himself down God’s angels would catch and save him. One of the Psalms says just this. But trusting God, not testing him is the only acceptable way.

Sometimes we too are tempted to put God to the test. “If only you do this I will believe in you.” But as Jesus said “You are not to put the Lord your God to the test.”.

Then in the third temptation Jesus has a vision of all the kingdoms of the world, which could be his if he swerved from the purpose of God in which alone good is to be found. So he decisively rejects this and the other temptations as coming from the devil.

We are not to think that this testing was confined to the forty days in the wilderness, it was part of his whole life and ministry. Later he equally decisively rejects the temptation offered by Peter to avoid the crucifixion. And on the cross he gets tormented by all those around him with the words of the second temptation “If you are the Son of God prove it by coming down from the cross.”

Through this testing, focussed in the desert period but going on throughout his life, Jesus gained and lived out the conviction that he was called to bring in God’s kingdom by his life and teaching alone. When asked for a sign he said that the only sign which would be given to the people of his generation was the sign of Jonah, which was no sign at all, just Jonah calling people to turn back to God. He did perform miracles, but he did so out of compassion, and it is clear that he was much exasperated by the constant calls on him to provide signs. His task was to proclaim the presence of God’s rule and to invite people to live under it and then let events take their tragic human course. People were left totally free to decide for themselves.

The most famous commentary on this story is in Dostoevsky’s great novel The Brothers Karamazov when Christ returns to earth and the grand inquisitor puts him on trial-why? Because, says the inquisitor, he respected human beings too much, and treated them as free when they were too weak to bear the burden of that freedom, So, as he puts it “We have corrected your great work and have based it on miracle, mystery and authority. And men rejoiced that they were once more led like sheep and that the terrible gift which had brought them so much suffering had at last been lifted from their hearts.”

But we stand with Christ, not the Grand Inquisitor and we freely come to him. And this Lenten period we come to him in the desert-not a literal desert but by making time to be alone and free of distractions. It is not just about being on one’s own, many people are on their own anyway, but whether we are with others or on our own so much of our life is, in Eliot’s words, being distracted from distraction by distraction. We form a desert by taking time to put these aside and be still before Christ Then in that stillness to let him strip away the self-

deceptions and illusions under which we mostly live and be our naked, vulnerable self before him. This may mean facing some painful truths, those inner demons that the desert fathers had to confront, because when we are still before the truth itself things come up from the depths. But this is a good thing, for God is the troubler of those depths. In that presence we know we are loved and cherished and knowing this we can be more honest with ourselves about ourselves. It is the one love that brings both painful self knowledge and the conviction that Christ holds us close through all things, in this life and beyond this life. It is one of the powerful themes running through Eliot's great poem "The Four Quartets"

Who then devised the torment? Love.

Love is the unfamiliar name

Behind the hands that wove

The intolerable shirt of flame

Which human power cannot remove

We only live, only suspire

Consumed by either fire or fire

The fire which brings self-knowledge and burns away the thin justificatory coatings of our lives is the Divine lover who seeks to bring us to our true self and so to grow his own life of love within us. So let us allow time this Lent to be still before Christ, free of distractions, letting him impart to us both a better knowledge of ourselves and a deeper understanding of our own calling as a Christian in the particular circumstances of our lives.