

Matthew 4.1-11

This week, my mother was turning out a drawer, when she found an old black and white postcard of the city of Jericho. It shows a fragment of an ancient settlement a scribble of houses clinging to the side of a steep conical mountain which is called the 'Mount of the Temptations'. Jericho lies close to the river Jordan, just opposite Bethany, where according to John's gospel, Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. And as today's gospel says, after his baptism Jesus is led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

Being tempted isn't the main thing Jesus does in the wilderness. He fasts for 40 days and nights, and surely he prays, and asks God for help in his coming ministry. But at the end of the time, when he is exhausted and faint with hunger, and resistance is at its lowest, the devil comes and tempts him to turn one of the stones around him into bread.

'One does not live by bread alone,' says Jesus, 'but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' Later in the gospel he shows how much he values bread, from the miracle of the loaves and fishes, to the Lord's Prayer, to the Last Supper. But perhaps, there in the desert, he remembers Moses, and how God sent manna from heaven to keep the Israelites alive in their desert. He doesn't want to play God by doing the same thing. And he refuses to use his faith, his divine power, for his own benefit. By saying that it is the word of God that gives him life, he tells the devil that it is God he relies on, God he serves, and never himself.

Undeterred, the devil whisks Jesus off to Jerusalem, to the topmost pinnacle of the Temple. There (quoting scripture to his purpose, and showing something of a sense of humour too) he says, if you are the Son of God, throw yourself down and let the angels catch you! But Jesus says, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'

How easy it would be, and how seductive, to stage a dramatic miracle how many people would fall down and worship him if he displayed himself like that! But it is vital to Jesus that people don't come to him because of signs and wonders and divine fireworks. Later in the gospels, when people come to him for healing, he even begs them not to tell anyone, because miracles are tricky things. Wonderworkers were two a penny in the first century, and some of them were great celebrities, and most of them were frauds. Jesus has no interest in being a celebrity and the only reason he wants people to turn to God is because they love God and long to be one with God.

The devil's last shot is to take Jesus twelve miles or so north-east, to a high conical mountain above Jericho, and show him all the kingdoms of the world in their splendour, and promise him power over them all if he will worship evil. Jesus looks down at Jericho, and remembers perhaps all the battles of the Israelites, the wars over territory, the feuds between fathers and sons and brothers, the intrigues and murders, and he says, 'Away with you, Satan, for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' To Jesus the idea that he should harness God's power to gain political or military power, is repugnant. It is no part of what he is here to do.

We sometimes assume, I think, that having faced these temptations and overcome them, Jesus can forget about them and get on with his ministry. But this isn't so much the end of the temptations, as a prospectus for them, because they go on attacking him all the way through his ministry. People are always wanting signs and wonders to prove who he is. Some people almost certainly want him to be a military Son of David and make a bid for political power. Even in Gethsemane, he is still fighting the temptation somehow to escape the cup of suffering.

In different ways, Jesus's temptations are all temptations to serve himself instead of serving God. His resistance sets the tone for the whole of his ministry. Later on, he will tell his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me,' and, 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.' Again and again, he tells the disciples what he told the devil: that having faith in God means giving up self-interest and self-gratification and serving only God.

We hear this story towards the beginning of Lent every year, and it's a central part of this time of prayer and preparation for Holy Week, because giving up self-interest and self-gratification are also our work during Lent. In recent years, the tradition of giving things up for Lent has gone out of fashion. People say, it's pretty trivial to give up puddings or alcohol. Better and more useful to add something do something for someone else. Of course, to serve other people is central to the gospel, and is always a good thing to do. It might be especially appropriate to take up a new project for other people after Pentecost, when we celebrate Jesus's work on earth passing to the disciples. But to me, Lent has another purpose, and it is anything but trivial. Because Lent is the time of year when we learn to give up ourselves. To deny ourselves in order to take up the cross.

This is the time when we try not to act out of self-interest. When we try to give up looking for admiration or approval from others. When we try to resist exercising power over them. When we try to let go of all the values and assumptions and demands of this world, and listen to what heaven requires of us. The tradition of giving up coffee or sweets or something small, is like Jesus's fasting in the desert a way of focussing our minds on the real, the big things we are giving up.

Lent is also a time of many prayers, and we are hearing about many kinds of prayer in our Lent discussion group. The most important prayer for Lent, I think, is the Lord's Prayer, and in Lent I pray it especially in Luke's version (which is not the version we normally use in church, which is Matthew's). Luke's version is shorter than Matthew's, and it runs, 'Father, let your name be worshipped. Let your reign come. Give us the bread we need today, and free us from our sins as we free one another. And do not put us to the test.'

In some ways, this prayer is all about temptation. Father we turn to you, forgetting ourselves. Let your name be worshipped, let your reign come let us speak always of you, serve only you. Give us the bread we need today help us to realize that what we need,

physical or spiritual, comes only from you. Free us from our sins because we have all been tempted in the past, and failed, and our sins are like wild-fire, scorching us and everyone we meet. Help us to free each other, knowing that we are all fragile and we all need God's help and one another's to be strong. And do not put us to the test. We know that we are not as strong as Jesus, and we dread failing again when we are tempted.

One of the helpful things about this prayer, is that it is expressed very positively. It makes clear that giving our selves to God is not in any way a negative thing. It's not about hating or torturing ourselves; it is about loving God and letting go of the things that separate us from God, because it is in God that life is most abundant and most powerfully good.

Not many of us are put to the ultimate test. But we are all tempted, every day. In Lent, we face our temptations power or pleasure or possessions, all the small-minded seductions of this world. We learn to recognize them and name them. We put ourselves in God's hands and pray to be released from them. We put ourselves in God's hands because, as Adam and Eve found out so long ago, that is the only place where we can be the people God created us to be.

Amen

Littlemore