

LENT COURSE OF SERMONS

‘Get behind me, Satan’

Lent 3

4 March 2018

This is the third Sunday that Fr. Nicholas and I are focusing on the three temptations that Jesus suffered in his wilderness testing.

Jesus is exhausted, and starving, and on the rack of temptation. As I said last week, it matters not at all how those temptations came. The profound comfort to us is that he suffered them. A Saviour who has no experience of temptation would have vanishingly little to offer to we human beings who suffer it, in one form or other, every day.

It is the form of the temptations - passed on by Jesus to his Disciples, and thence to our Gospel-writers - that are so revealing. They tell us so much about the decisions he made, at the very start of his ministry, as to what kind of ministry it would be; what kind of Messiah he would be. Had he not made those decisions, hammered out in the furnace of the wild lands, we would almost certainly not be here. Against the background of his screaming hunger in the present, and his fear for his personal safety for the future, the temptations have so far been two-fold; the first, to use his Father-granted power to end that hunger, and more, to use it to attract a hungry following; the second, to compel hearts and minds by offering crushing proof of his power, and in the process, confirm to himself that he could be invulnerable. He passed both of those tests. Here is the third.

‘Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

The first two temptations having failed, Jesus was being offered the Deal.

The Deal was very simple; turn away from the Father; who had driven him into the torment of this hunger and loneliness, to introduce him to a ministry of danger and hardship; instead, tap into and commit himself to the power-dynamic of the world, and reap the rewards; quick, easy and comfortable.

We know the power dynamic of the world; we know it very well. Look at any civilisation that has moved beyond a simple hunter-gather or pastoral lifestyle, and you will see it. Look at the river valley civilizations of the Yellow river, Indus, Nile and Tigris-Euphrates, the temple building kingdoms of the Americas, strip away the differences of script, costume and language, and the similarities are striking. On the bottom of the social scale are the farmers, hewers of wood and drawers of water in their millions. In the middle, numbered in thousands, are the scribes, priests, lawyers, and administrators. And, minutely, at the top, are the rulers. Move forward in millennia, and you have a global civilization, where it has been recently calculated that half of the world's wealth belongs to the top 1% of the population, the top 10% hold 85% of it, and in the US, the five largest landowners, all white, own more rural land than all of black America combined.

And this wealth distribution is held in place by deals. It was in Jesus' time as well. The old democratic pattern of land-holding had almost entirely disappeared, replaced by small numbers of huge estates, largely held by foreigners and the priestly class. To these men, a turned-to –the –world Jesus would have had a huge amount to offer. The popular following he

would have been able to generate and control could have diffused the pressure. And in turn, the men of power would have smoothed his way, promoted his message.

But what would the message have been? For the dealer may gain, but is inexorably defined by the deals he or she has made, and the deal Jesus would have made would have corrupted his message at the root, effectively making it unrecognizable from what we know today.

It didn't happen. Matthew records Jesus' response as sharp and decisive. "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."

What happened instead, was radical. Jesus didn't seek out the sources of power, didn't concentrate on building a comfortable base of operations within it; he took to the road; immersed himself in the lives of ordinary people, counting on their hospitality where he could, living in the open where he couldn't.' Foxes have holes, and birds have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'. He didn't court people of power, instead gathering around him a bunch of fishermen, a discontented revolutionary, and the tax collector who wrote down the account I have just read. They were, as Mark testified in his account, a very ordinary, occasionally very flawed, group of people.

With that group, he led, assuredly, but in a radically different way. He washed feet, the action of the poorest servant. 'The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve'. And while he did indeed have an 'inner circle' – Peter, James and John - he didn't encourage a hierarchy among the group as a whole. Instead when two of them asked to be particularly special, he gathered them all together and said " You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave"

And finally, when it became abundantly clear that if he didn't make some kind of deal with those in power he wouldn't be around for very long, he 'set his face towards Jerusalem' and went right on doing what he had been doing before, including driving the money changers from the Temple – until they killed him for it.

Deals have their day. The civilizations I mentioned before are all gone, and who knows how long our own will last? But two thousand years later, billions follow Jesus – more every day, even though it doesn't feel like it just in our particular corner of the world. How he led created a group of men and women who were prepared to die for him; the message he gave them, and the power of God's spirit, gave them something to die for; and the Church was born. The sacrifice the deal demanded was not paid; the sacrifice needed to give birth to the Church – that of his own life – was, and we are here today.

What does all that say to us? We are in the world, and subject to all its temptations and lures. The pressure on us to do the kind of deals – especially, but not only, at work, is variable, but it is constant. What can Jesus teach us in how to live our lives under it? The key is in his words of rejection, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him". Every time we come under that pressure, we need to ask ourselves 'What does serving God, and only God, mean in this particular context? What does it mean for the e mail I write, the conversation I have, my action in the playground or at the School gates? How can I make this better?

God give us, this Lent and in the year ahead, the power to learn that.