

In these first three weeks of Lent, Fr William and I will reflect on Christ's temptations in the Wilderness – which is where the Gospel leads us today (Mark i, 9 – 15); reflections on materialism, on pride/invulnerability and on the pursuit of power. And we shall want to ask what they would have meant for his ministry and the character of his Messiahship if he had given into them and how his ministry clearly refuted them. How are His temptations our own?

At the moment I am reading two books, back to back (among others, I should add, since I seem to live inside a library!). What did Jesus look like? is written by a professor at King's, London, Joan Taylor, who is professor of Christian Origins and Second Temple Judaism. Her other book has the, to me, much more interesting title Jesus and Brian Exploring the Historical Jesus and his times via (you've guessed) Monty Python's Life of Brian. The other is by an American artist and film-maker, William E Jones, an illustrated essay that accompanied an art exhibition a few years ago (UCLA, 2013) called Imitation of Christ.

Taylor sees Jesus as a Jewish teacher, a man of Law, who would have worn a mantle of undyed wool over a short tunic, suitable for walking and working. She uses early examples of mosaics and wall paintings from catacombs and highly prized items like ivory carvings and marble sarcophagi. For Jones Jesus was marginalised, living at the edge, with the poor in the forgotten corners of society.

Which is the Christ we follow into the Wilderness? If we follow the teacher, the rabbi, the Jewish leader our encounters may be very different from those we might have if we stick with the indigent, the impoverished, ordinary bloke, an angry carpenter's son, bent upon transforming society of the inequality and oppression around him. And that immediately challenges how we see the effect on him of the temptations and his response but also, by the sheer variety of ways in which we might see Jesus, situates our experience alongside his, whomever we are.

If I am wealthy, a senior manager perhaps or a leading lawyer, the first temptation will challenge me not because I cannot afford all the bread in the world but because it is an encounter in the Wilderness. If I am used to having a roof over my head, several perhaps, in more than one country maybe, with the means for travel and transport to get to them, the threat of being out in the wild is real – loss of status, loss of social position. Maybe because I am so well off materially I have not even begun to be aware of what such circumstance might mean as I scurry across London Bridge to the office and disregard the rough sleepers on the pavement or the old woman selling The Big Issue.

Wanting more, the insatiable appetite for material gain, for yet more and more, is the curse of our society which we regard as being Developed. For what we think of 'developing' countries makes us persuade them to have more and more, especially if we can sell it to them.

To the starving man in the desert the offer of bread at any cost must seem to be tempting. And as the week's unfolding of Oxfam has demonstrated all too clearly and too uncomfortably, such temptations can be exploited.

I can offer you safety, I can offer you sanctuary, I can offer you shelter if you have sex with me. I can offer you food and housing if you work for me for no pay. I can provide a livelihood for you beyond your imaginings if you service all my needs.

It is all around us if we have eyes to see and ears to hear where the powerful can exploit the vulnerable with the temptation of material affluence.

And it is not only in the volunteer charitable sector working overseas. If we look seriously at the accusations brought against the UN Peace-Keeping forces in some of the world's most fragile societies or if we look at our own Armed Forces serving in hidden corners overseas.

All of which would have been all too familiar to Jesus in his day, growing up in a country under occupation, with a powerful militarised presence. All that we know of those communities suggests that such a society has every opportunity for the black market and for exploitative, transgressive relationships.

What might Jesus' ministry have looked like if he had turned the stones into bread? As a miracle worker he would have had even more success. More would have flocked to him to be fed: A sort of Pied Piper effect. The underclass, the despised, the downtrodden. All of these might have gained short term benefit. But what of their lives? I don't want to get into the arguments about whether benefits create dependencies in society, although it is a discussion that our Society needs to have.

What would such a one-off demonstration have meant in Jesus' day? Well, this need not be speculation. We have the answer given to us in the Gospels. The miraculous Feedings of the Five Thousand, or Four Thousand depending on the text. Against all seeming odds Jesus is able to feed all those who come to him. Beer and sandwiches. The multiplication of the loaves and fishes is misunderstood by those who come to Him, who is the Bread of Life. They eat and do not understand.

Wherein lies the temptation for us? Perhaps we should spend this period of forty days trying to review again our dependence upon the material and in examining our relationships, in our family, at home, at work, in our society.