

The Temptations

Sermons at Stepping Stones usually have a simple practical down-to-earth point, something we can all apply. I heard about one of this type last week. It was given during a school assembly - the prime place for spiritual truth to be imparted to eager ears - when a gym master, condemned by Law into doing his religious bit, spoke on the Feeding of the Five Thousand, stressing the last sentence - 'what they had left over as taken up, and there were twelve baskets of the fragments'. Then came the practical application - it was to encourage the children to go and pick up litter from the school playing field....if it was good enough for the disciples it's good enough for you.

This is not that sort of sermon; it is not about encouraging us to do simple practical things. It is about helping us understand who Jesus was, who Jesus is, and what he came to do. That is what this whole series is about. Any simple lessons we can take home and put into practise this afternoon will be wholly incidental.

The story follows straight on from last weeks, when Jesus commenced his period of Ministry by going to John to be baptised, identifying himself with sinners, with ordinary folk, with you and me, right at the beginning. The Son of Man identifying with men. This week it is as Son of God that he meets with the devil. One of the most important things we have to keep in our heads is that Jesus is Son of Man **and** Son of God; historically, Christians have tended to stress one or the other. The evangelical danger is sometimes to stress the Son of God, coming on the clouds of heaven, a two-edged sword in his mouth, us all falling on our faces in awe and wonder, blinding us with power and glory - all the stuff of rousing choruses. The liberal danger is to stress the Son of Man, standing alongside us, identified with us, just like one of us, accepting us warts and all - but then what?. Humanity along cannot save humanity. The truth is Jesus was, and is, both Son of Man and Son of God- we have got to get that into our heads, and keep it there.

Back to the story. After the Baptism, and God's confirmation 'You are my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased', the Spirit leads him away from the crowds into the Wilderness. I can supply some background here, thanks to Barclay. Between the inhabited area of Judea and the Dead Sea was a wilderness 35 by 15 miles called 'Jeshimmon', which means 'The Devastation'. Not rally the place for timeshares, or even Mastersun holidays. 'The hills were like dust heaps, the limestone looked blistered and peeling; the rocks were bare and jagged; the ground sounded hollow to the horses' hooves; it glowed with heat like a vast furnace'. A desperate place. The Bible says Jesus was there forty days and nights, without food, and was hungry - which sounds like a desperate understatement. And he met the devil there. One children's Bible I remember showed Jesus, immaculate in his long white robe and well groomed hair and beard, facing a peculiar bright red person - somehow I don't think it was quite like that. What we know is that Jesus was aware of three temptations - we are not sure of the order they came in (the different Gospels differ) or whether they were repeated, or each presented once only. What we do know is what Jesus must have told the disciples at some later date, this is the only way we can have the story.

But there were three separate temptations he had to face, three areas he had to wrestle with, before the way was clear for him to take the Gospel to the waiting world. I will deal with them

in the order that Luke relates them. They were temptations that were quite specific to Jesus at the beginning of his Ministry; they are probably not the sort that the devil uses on us. Much more basic and ordinary temptations usually do for us very nicely. But some of the principles underlying the temptations, and Jesus' response to them, still apply.

The First Temptation is to turn stones to bread. This would not have made sense if Jesus had not already realised he had some pretty awesome powers, it would not have been a possibility. And it can be taken at two levels. At a very basic one, Jesus was physically hungry, a wholemeal loaf or even a peanut-butter sandwich would have been welcome there and then. Both he and the devil knew that there had been a time before when God's people were wandering in a wilderness, and God intervened and fed them supernatural food, manna. Barclay says the limestone of the district breaks into chunks that looks just like loaves of bread.... But at a deeper level, it has been seen as a temptation for Jesus to attract people by using his powers to give them physical things, to lure them into the Kingdom with material goodies, they will; always attract. But they do not necessarily attract men to God. Think of the Cargo cults where some hapless and in some ways very innocent natives have worshipped aeroplanes on the grounds that aeroplanes bring them exciting material things very different from anything they have ever had before.. Jesus see this: He strikes back at the devil with a scripture - always a good principle. 'It is written, Man does not live on bread alone' (Deuteronomy 8.3)

Does the church still fall for this one? Prosperity theology comes close to it, like most errors starting with a truth - God loves us, and desires good things for his children - and twisting it., in the face of all Jesus' warnings about riches and eyes of needles, so that 'good' things mean 'material' things. 'King's kids travel first class' ...

Then comes something much more profound. A sudden glimpse taking in all the kingdoms of the inhabited world, spread out in space and time as if seen from a high mountain. They are incredibly impressive; think of the lights of a great city at night, and multiply it ten thousand times. And it is all on offer. 'I will give you all their authority and splendour, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want. So if you worship me, it will all be yours'. There is some heavy stuff here. All the authority and splendour of the kingdoms of the world - another translation reads 'the power and glory of them' - is actually in the devil's gift. This is God's world, his creation, we know that, we know good things come from him - but this authority and splendour, power and glory of men's kingdom actually belongs to the other side, the devil doles it out. How do we handle this one? Can we always see the dividing line between the two domains. A book that made a great impact on me, and of which i have no longer a copy, was 'Jesus rediscovered' by Malcolm Muggeridge. He writes very powerfully about the power and glory of this world, and how Jesus turns it all upside down. Think of the traditional symbol of earthly power and glory - a crown. Kings wear crowns, the Pope wears a triple crown, of gold and precious stones. The crown Jesus wore was one of twisted thorns, intended for pain and mockery - but after this, Muggeridge says, it is every other crown that looks ridiculous, pretentious and pompous. For a moment we see the world's power and glory for what it is, an illusion, a deceit, part of the devil's sleight-of-hand. People who want to look important and dignified in fact look like fools. Yet the church gets in on the act, as usual - not just the pope with his triple crown, but maybe all the other robes and vestments, and the trappings of we-need-to-look-important to impress the world.

Do we go for earthly authority and splendour, power and glory today? There are lots of times

that the church has. What about Wilfrid, just up the valley at Hexham, building what people said was 'the greatest church north of the Alps' to wow the natives. Think of the later 19th century when the Methodists overstretched their financial resources building large and impressive chapels that were never filled and now simply provide a ready source of discount warehouses, solariums and Hindu temples. Think about English imperialism in the days when the Empire spread across the whole globe. Think of ways we might go for it today. What about wanting record numbers of Christians at a rally, Christian bands having no.1 hits etc.... all in some ways good things, but perilously close to the devil's domain. We can maybe actually get them if we really want them, for just a respectful nod in his direction....

What is the alternative to going for the power and glory, for the things the world sees as shining jewels?. Maybe it is to realise that we operate in enemy-occupied territory and have to act in quite a different way, from the bottom up, a bit like the Resistance in German-occupied France. Jesus in his parables of the Kingdom talks about tiny mustard seeds growing into great trees, yeast making bread, salt bringing savour. All things that start little, but let God provide the power, and end big. This is all in a way secret work, subversion of an established order, not playing the game the world's way..

Jesus has a mission, he knows he wants to rescue men. The Devil is offering him the world's idea - which is basically the devil's idea of a highway into their hearts and minds, at the price of just a little bit of collusion. But no, he turns to scripture again IT IS WRITTEN Worship the Lord and serve him only. (Deuteronomy again, 6.13). He is going to do it God's way, which the world may not understand.

Then the third temptation, suddenly there they are looking down from a pinnacle onto the Temple, the centre of the whole Jewish religious system, in Jerusalem. First there is a gentle taunt, the casting of a subtle doubt 'If you are the Son of God - throw yourself down!'. And then the devil gets in on the game of quoting scripture; he has been reading Psalm 91 (it was in his Scripture Union notes that morning)- he is quite a pious person after all. 'For it is written (copying Jesus' own phrase) 'He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully, they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone' .

Various interpretations of this are possible, Barclay suggests that the devil is suggesting Jesus grabs the peoples' minds by giving them a sensation, a 450 foot leap down from the highest point of the Temple into the Kidron valley - this one will make the front page of the Jerusalem Gazette, the high priest will really take notice, even the Romans will get the message. CARPENTER FROM NAZARETH LANDS UNHARMED AFTER DEATH-DEFYING LEAP. CAN THIS BE THE MESSIAH? INVITED TO DINNER BY HIGH PRIEST AND GOVERNOR..

There might be other ways of looking at this one. The Temple was the centre of the Jew's worship of God, of the administration of what we now term the old Covenant. Jesus must have known, even here at the beginning, that he would come into conflict with the whole monolithic establishment of synagogues, temple and the priestly hierarchy. He was human -Son of Man - and could not have seen all the details of the way ahead, but perhaps he sensed and, being human, feared, the sort of painful end he might come to, here at the centre of it all in Jerusalem when he brought God's truth face-to-face with established religion?. Was the devil suggesting that, with a little adjustment of his course, he might get out of it without

actually being hurt, without ‘dashing his foot against a stone?’ Were there things that God just would not let happen?

But for Jesus it is back to Deuteronomy for a third time (Deut 6.16) IT SAYS Do not put the Lord your God to the test. He knew he had powers from God, and surely, he trusted in Scripture? . But, it would be putting those powers to a wrong use; the result might well be a sensation, but as Barclay says, sensations don’t last, a nine-day wonder, then forgotten

Jesus did not throw himself down; he resisted the devil a third time, with Scripture; the devil departed ‘until an opportune time’ (he never really departs in this life); some of the other accounts tell us that angels then appeared and ministered to Jesus. He had hammered out the direction and means of his mission, he was going to play it God’s way, not the worlds and not the devils. He returns to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and starts to preach in the synagogues, and God’s Kingdom is unleashed upon the earth.