

tempted

a sermon preached on the

first sunday in lent

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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Ps 32; Romans 5:12-21; Matthew 4:1-11

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil”.¹ Much as we might prefer to side-step the devil’s role in Jesus’ life, the Scriptures just won’t let us get away with it. I am reminded of the celebrated and scandalous role played by Satan in Job’s terrible saga, in which Satan even seems to have a special audience with God.² This wilderness testing business insists on a role for a malevolent factor, by whatever name we give it; just as the ancient Hebrew theologian writers of Genesis strove to find a language to express this archaic reality.³

Moreover, we cannot escape the fact that the gospels’ accounts of the passion and death of Jesus *depend* upon the reality of dark energies.⁴ Jesus is not only betrayed; but betrayed with a kiss, the kiss of a friend.⁵

While theologians and the sensitively pious might be found to be hand-wringing over this scandalous element in the Bible’s stories of redemption, any person who is honest is able to recognise the reality of these dark energies – which the sacred Scriptures paint in graphic picture language – as realities in our own lives.

Listening to the Gospel, we naturally think of the life of Jesus, of course. Yet it’s crucial to remember that the gospel is not merely an account of an historical person and event; it’s the story of *the human experience*, of all human becoming. This is how we can safely and healthily understand St Paul’s admittedly dense yet breakthrough idea; that “one man’s righteousness leads to justification and life for all”.⁶

This is what *always* happens: at the very moment of conversion or initiation or epiphany⁷ – “This is my son/daughter” – a person is immediately driven into wilderness, exposed to dark energies.

Lent always begins with this fact of human experience; through an experience of *separation*, *something dark* must be encountered.

And we note also that Jesus was “led up” into the wilderness *by the Spirit*. The Spirit of God *wills* this encounter with dark energies; wills him to be tempted, wills him into darkness, to the place of grave danger. And the Spirit does not hold his hand. Jesus is left to his own devices, to respond to the dark energies, to ‘temptation’, with his own free will. Does that shock us?

And the way cannot be found except by this separation and temptation. The meaning of Jesus’ baptism, and the meaning of his life as ‘beloved Son’, cannot be found in the comfort of collective identity or group-think, in tribal, cultural, familial, or even religious groups – nor in the appearance of tranquillity.

Remember, Jesus’ experience is *our* experience. The Spirit leads *us* away from whatever comfort we feel we need, so that we will be tempted by the dark energies; for this is how every one of us comes to the truth of our vocation as beloved daughter or son.

The devil makes Jesus three deliciously tempting offers: the temptation to material power;⁸ the temptation to religious power;⁹ the temptation to political power.¹⁰

Look, with this power to turn stones into bread you could feed the world!¹¹ The end of poverty. Fulfilment of the socialist dream.

Look, with this power to throw yourself off the temple and not be hurt you could rule the world!¹² The end of all kings and empires. The monarchy to end all monarchies. Fulfilment of the totalitarian dream.

Look, with this power you will have the power of God himself.¹³ The end of any need to submit to God’s will, God’s power, like a magic wand, is permanently at your disposal, to give you whatever you want. The end of humility. Fulfilment of the dream to be masters of our own destiny.

1 Matthew 4:1

2 Job 1:6-12

3 Genesis 2:16, 3:1

4 Matthew 10:16-16, 16:23, 17:22, 26:14-16

5 Matthew 26:48

6 Romans 5:18

7 Matthew 3:16-17

8 Matthew 4:3

9 Matthew 4:5-6

10 Matthew 4:9

11 Matthew 4:3

12 Matthew 4:5-6

13 Matthew 4:8-9

I am struck by the fact that Jesus does not argue with the devil. He simply cites Scripture. ‘One lives only by the word of God’.¹⁴ ‘Do not put the Lord to the test’.¹⁵ ‘Worship God alone’.¹⁶ None of these are particularly convincing as arguments; they are in fact more like the prayer mantras taught in Orthodox Christianity.

Reflecting further on this exchange between Jesus and the devil, I have been wondering, *where* is this struggle with temptation taking place? Where, exactly, is this ‘wilderness’? Where is ‘the devil’ to whom the Spirit has led Jesus?

As in all matters religious, much time and precious energy, and money, can be wasted in the search for concrete external historic locations; and this of course has been very good for the religious tourism and trinket business in every century.

But it should be clear to us that Jesus was a teacher in the wisdom tradition; his business is not spiritual tourism, but the transformation of souls, and the work to which his Spirit leads us is at its core a work of the soul. The old fashioned religious phrase ‘the salvation of souls’ does express a fundamental truth. When Jesus teaches, as we heard last Sunday – that those who try to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life will find it¹⁷ – he is surely not counselling the literal external concrete self-destruction of our lives. No, obviously not!

For Jesus is a *wisdom* teacher. The work of the Spirit is an *inner work*; with *outer consequences*.

This order of priority is crucial. Jesus’ ministry is the *consequence* of his inner struggle; not the other way around. The main ‘battlefield’ is the *soul*; everything creative flows from this centre, from temptation at the hand of his own inner dark energies.

Being profoundly tempted by his own inner desire, for material power, political power, religious power – left to struggle alone, without his hand being held – is the very means by which Jesus is then able to fulfil his vocation. The ‘devil’ – his own dark potential – has been instrumental in Jesus’ formation. As a consequence of this inner struggle Jesus will, in due course, be able to voluntarily, freely chose to drink the cup of suffering.¹⁸ The external act is only possible as a consequence of the rich fruit of his inner struggle.

Lent is a spiritual discipline for renewing us in this task. The ashes, the simplicity, the silence, the bare altar; these and the ways in which we simplify our lives during Lent are outer signs of the struggle with our own inner dark energies, which each of us is uniquely led to, by the Spirit.

This Lent, may the Spirit lead you, and all of us, into the truth of our daughter and sonship.

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¹⁴ Deuteronomy 8:3
¹⁵ Deuteronomy 6:16
¹⁶ Deuteronomy 6:13
¹⁷ Matthew 16:24-25
¹⁸ Matthew 26:39