

Lent 1 – First Lent Sermon by Rev Deryck Collingwood – 9 March 2014



Over these next three weeks I will be reflecting on the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness (*picture left*). For Jesus, immediately after his baptism in the Jordan, with that affirming dove and the voice saying ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased’, now about to set out on his public ministry, the voice of

temptation now hits out at the very ground of his being – wrestling with the question of who he really is: “*IF you are the Son of God... command these stones to become loaves of bread.*” “*IF you are the Son of God... throw yourself down from this pinnacle, for it is written, ‘angels will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone’...*”

Temptation is never too far away from any of us. Like the serpent in today’s story of the Garden of Eden, whispering to Eve, ‘Go on, that fruit isn’t really going to kill you; you might have been told it will, but actually it will liberate you...’, so for Jesus and for us, temptation tends to sneak in the back door, hit us on the positive ground: ‘of course I can do that; it’s not going to do any harm...’ and seek to make us feel better about ourselves in the process.

A few general comments before digging deeper. We have different accounts of the temptation story of course in the various Gospels. Matthew and Luke both tell us the familiar story, but put things in a different order. Mark simply says that ‘the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, where he remained for 40 days and was tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts. And angels waited on him.’ Short and simple; plenty open to imagination. John? Nothing!

But why would the Spirit drive (or ‘lead’, in Matthew & Luke) Jesus into the wilderness in the first place? Those who have travelled in the land know that the hills of Judea and Samaria form a sort of backbone to the whole region. On the west side of the watershed, towards the Mediterranean, the land is green and fertile; to the east, down into the Jordan Valley, it is dry and arid, a complete contrast. Jerusalem sits right up on top in the middle. Almost as soon as you travel east into the West Bank, you find yourself in wilderness.

Jesus wasn't coming from the cool of the hills, but from the heat of the Jordan Valley, from baptism by John. The hills around the Jordan appear menacing and hostile. In summer they are indeed hot, stony and dry. But in winter and spring they can become remarkably green, a variety of plants springing to life in the winter rains. But throughout the year there is a surprising amount of life in this wilderness, for there is water beneath the ground and natural springs arise in a number of places.

The Israelites of Old Testament times were renowned as great water diviners; they had been desert people. Today's Bedouin still know how to exploit the wilderness, just as Australia's aboriginals do. Over the centuries cavernous cisterns have been created in the rock to store winter rains for flocks and crops. The old road from Jerusalem to Jericho has a water course running



through it and a monastery (*picture left*) commemorating Elijah has survived here for many hundreds of years, as have others, in the middle of nowhere.

Luke simply tells us that Jesus ate nothing during those 40 days, though there was probably the potential around

him to do so. Matthew uses the more formal word of 'fasted', an act of will – driven by the Spirit, understood as a necessity under God, but nonetheless an act of personal will.

But for all its potential for life, this wilderness is nonetheless a place of huge challenge. Life does not present itself on a plate. And as we know well enough from the stories of Mary's Meals and other aid agencies in places of hunger, other aspects of life can easily get put on hold when one is hungry. Fundamental needs take over: scavenging is the first, if not only priority.

Jesus himself chooses, or at least agrees, to fast, we are told, for 40 days. In that climate, that's enough for anyone. A religious fast does not necessarily entail complete abstinence from food; we are told that in ancient times the attitude was more akin to Moslem practice today – do not eat within the hours of daylight, but at night it's permitted. But perhaps remembering the stories of Moses and Elijah, Jesus possibly went without food day *and* night. And like Moses and Elijah, that meant keeping himself away from other human

contact, where he would be persuaded to break such a fast. He had to accept the desert as a place of solitude in the most challenging way.

Others lived in communities in desert places, including people he may well have had contact with, down by the Dead Sea, those who were responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls – dissidents from Jerusalem who saw the Temple Priesthood as corrupt and waited for God to restore things to proper order.

But they, as other desert dwellers, knew that to live together in community in such circumstances is one thing. To be expelled from community with stocks of food and water carefully rationed, could be a sentence to death. Many of the rules and regulations in Leviticus and the like, that we find rather strange today, reflect this absolute priority for loyalty to the community and finding ways to live together in precarious conditions without jeopardising the safety of everyone else.



So here, hungry in this hostile wilderness, vulnerable and alone in the silence, Jesus is confronted with the most basic of human fears – what we might now refer to as ‘inner demons’ – that can get in the way of living a life for God; of living in such a way that he will be capable of perfect love.

The first of which *has* to be the most fundamental: ‘turn these stones into bread!’ How do we get our mental and spiritual priorities sorted out if we are plagued with the physical realities of pure survival? How often has it been said, “Don’t try to feed the mind and soul, until you have fed the stomach.”?

The Israelites suffered that hunger in the desert in the story of the Exodus and lost their faith. Yet still they were provided for by manna from heaven. Moses went back up the mountain and neither ate nor drank for 40 days while new tablets of the Law were created.

One might say Jesus passes through a similar test in order to further restore what was lost by Israel in that journey.

Elijah too fasted as he travelled 40 days through the southern wilderness to that mountain in Sinai, there laying his frustrations before God that Israel had

abandoned the ways of the Lord. And there in the cave he found that it wasn't in the big splash events that religion, let alone Hollywood, delights in, the wind and fire and earthquake, that his answer came, but in the silence and the still small voice. The answer was probably there all the time if only he could hear it. But he needed that space and that clarity to hear what he needed to hear: "Go, appoint Elisha and all that needs to happen will follow."

That is something the desert experience offers. Through the years and still, there are those voices which attest to the clarity of mind and spirit that comes in and through the desert; when we make an act of will to rise above the basic urge to put our own needs first.

Ivan Illich, searching out Br Carlo Carretto in the Sahara, commented on the immensity of the desert being quite overpowering; and the emptiness of the desert making possible what seems impossible – a joyful acceptance of our own uselessness! Carlo Carretto and the man who inspired him to enter the desert experience, Charles de Foucault, are people I will come back to over the next couple of weeks.

For Moses and Elijah, the question was, "Lord God, what do you want of me, in order to lead your people?" It is these two great figureheads of course that bear Jesus up at that moment of transfiguration on the road to Jerusalem, the road to suffering and death, the road to glory.

But for Jesus and his followers, the question becomes, "*Father*, what do you want of me, that I may *reveal your love*?"

And two things are required:

First, to acknowledge that we are creatures of the living God. We are not here to do our own will but God's will. That's a very tough cookie, one as tough as the stones it may be baked on.

And second? To accept that it is a very different matter to put these things to the test for *real* than it is to talk about them.

There are many deserts in this world, many wildernesses. Not everyone can go off to Judea or the Sahara. There are wildernesses of silent isolation in urban areas just as there are in the spectacular open spaces. Not everyone's health would suggest that stopping eating is a good idea at all at all. But actively to seek the call of God and be willing to overcome inner desires that may get in the way of hearing that call which is personal and individual, with clarity... that is our Lenten task: a limited task, but with lasting outcomes.

In the Exodus story in Deuteronomy, Moses says to the people, "Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty *years* in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither

you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

In repeating those words in the face of temptation, Jesus offers himself, his body, as bread broken for the life of the world, which, when we break and share among ourselves, we reveal the love of God for the world in Christ.

Father, what do you wish from us, that we may reveal your love in the world of your creating?