

Lent 2 – Second Lent Sermon by Rev Deryck Collingwood – 16 March 2014

In this second address on the temptations of Jesus, I follow Luke's order rather than Matthew: Jesus is now taken up a high mountain to wrestle with power. He is shown the kingdoms of the world. Worship me, says the devil, and not only are all these kingdoms or their authority yours, but their *glory* too – for power has been given to me, and I can give to *you* if you worship me.

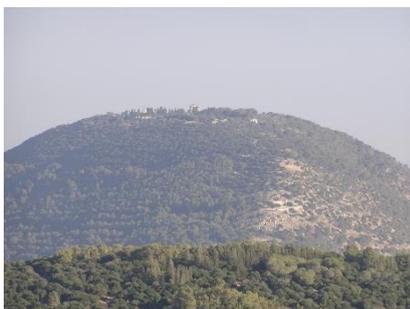


Mountains and high places feature a lot in the old stories. In the Exodus, after fasting 40 days on Mount Horeb in Sinai and 40 years in the wilderness, Moses arrived at the top of Mount Nebo, on the east side of the river Jordan, from where – if you're lucky – you get fabulous views across the Jordan Valley and Dead Sea, to the Judean wilderness beyond – right opposite, as it happens, the mountain associated with the temptation of Jesus, behind Jericho.



Moses looked across, seeing the temptations of the fertile oasis of Jericho, but was not able to enter the land; he died there on Mount Nebo. The taking of Jericho was left to Joshua, a story full of ambiguity, not just in its magical trumpets and bloodthirsty detail but in the fact that archaeologists have revealed no substantial walls of that period at all. Jericho, it appears, was there for the taking and the trumpets, far from needing to rattle down the walls, could simply sound the grateful alleluias.

For all of their apparent power, and the subsequent symbolic importance of Jericho itself, it was the crossing of the Jordan river itself at this point in the story that held real symbolic power, being the natural boundary of the land and also symbolising that real power to bring life – the gift of water in a thirsty land – a power that John the Baptist exploited in his promise of new life through repentance to a land expecting their Messiah.



But mountains and high places were not just places to look out from or have dreams and revelations. They were places of real power too. We hear much about the high places which were seats of both temporal power – hill forts sometimes fearsome in their capacity to subdue the surrounding



countryside; and also spiritual power – places where altars were built to offer prayers and sacrifice to the gods, close to the heavens, to appease the spiritual forces.

Here was plenty room for ambiguity in the battle for power between state and religion, between kings and priests and, for that matter, prophets. Look no further than the stories of Elijah and hill-top sacrifices with their devastating effects on the governance of the state. People lived in fear of those high places – when we hear the words of the psalmist, 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help?'... they had no comforting ring of beauty and viewing points. These were menacing places. It is no accident that most new settlements in Israel occupy hilltops today.

So when Jesus is taken up high, he is wrestling in similar battle grounds: with the powers of the world; the powers of religion; the powers of faith.

And we are still confronted in the meeting places of temporal and spiritual power. Those of us who have been on pilgrimage recently became very aware that those who look after the sites that visitors to Israel and the West Bank most wish to see, are known by the very temporal term of 'custodians' of the holy places.



Ironically, this rather potent title, bestowed by Papal authority, is given to those who might be thought most gentle – the Franciscans. Like any other group of people they are a mixture; many of them delightful. But the authority bestowed upon them soon becomes apparent when it is time for a religious procession, say on the Via Dolorosa – the Way of the Cross – or in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre: nothing but nothing will be allowed to get in the way of this demonstration of religious power.

We should not get too upset, because we live with such things all the time. In matters of state, in Scotland it may be that any overt religious pressure exercised by the national Church may be somewhat more democratic than expected in the Church of England, with its presence in the House of Lords; and the C of E is of course proud of its ceremonial abilities on state occasions.



The case for maintaining such direct influence in the national affairs of the state in the House of Lords may be more debatable than involvement in state ceremonial. In Scotland, Presbyterianism might be expected to be more comfortable raising a stronger prophetic voice, but of course it doesn't always work that way either; in the end of the day, we are all a mixed bunch, whatever our traditions and ways.

Perhaps since the middle of the 20th century, we have become accustomed to holding these matters in some sort of tension and we are happy to be a blend, not just in society or within the Church, but within ourselves.

But occasionally prophetic voices do raise the call of protest and reform. With a wee nod this week to Tony Benn, whether you agreed with him or not, we have come to take much of what those immediate post-war years fought for, not least in the welfare state as well as general levels of comfort, for granted.

And during these years we have also experienced a move away from formal religion. That call of Jesus to "be in the world but not of the world"... has perhaps become almost as uncomfortable for those of us within the structures of Church as it would appear to be to those outside it.

For what religion ends up doing much of the time is encourage us to acknowledge Christ in the most worldly of ways which we then have to defend, as custodians of faith as well as of buildings, and put ourselves at odds with others who differ from us.

But Jesus also says, "I have other sheep, not of this fold..."

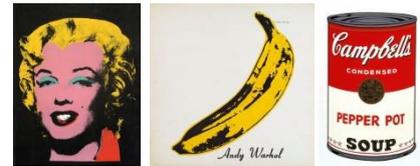
Well, one only has to look at the shelves in 'spirituality' sections of bookshops these days to realise how minority a concern Christianity as a 'religion' has become. Our society appears to be less and less comfortable with traditional forms of religion generally.

At the same time we are surrounded by icons of materialism and they are very seductive – to Christians of all ages as much as anyone else.



I am grateful to that well known Methodist preacher, Leslie Griffiths, for a discussion of Andy Warhol in a book about 10 years ago. In many ways, Warhol himself is an icon of modern materialism. But he was also a man of deep faith, regularly attending mass throughout his life – and also quite devoted to caring for people in the homeless shelters of New York.

Inevitably condemned by traditional Catholicism for being gay, he bore that deep inner rift felt by so many of not feeling able to let his attendance at mass go, but also not feeling able to participate fully and receive.



Alongside his more famous pop art he produced many pieces of religious art, including many variations on da Vinci's 'Last Supper'.

But perhaps the most striking is one that juxtaposes that da Vinci scene with motor bikes, iconic symbols of freedom and power and sexuality, with a price tag in the middle, a sign of cheap commercialism.



It's as if he wants to confront us with that tension between the self-giving Christ who resists such temptation to power and all those things of the world that bring us self-satisfaction and reward, maybe even within the relative wealth that he enjoyed, and a fear of what an altruistic 'doing good for others' may restrict us to if we give of ourselves because it will bring recognition for ourselves... rather than become the act of pure love to which Christ himself is purified and calls his followers to aspire.

So if we hear that call and seek to follow up this mountain with Jesus, a question for us is: *Where do we place our true values?* Where do we invest our time, money, interest, hope for change and for the future?

That is where we lay our worth – our worth-ship, our worship, within our lives as well as in our words.

