



Temptation in the Wilderness 3 – ‘Push God to the Limit’

Jesus said to his weary disciples, “Come away with me to a deserted place, and rest...” In Galilee, quiet deserted places were rather different to the Judean wilderness of the temptation story, though that time apart for rest didn’t last long before the crowds caught up with Jesus and his friends.

In the true wilderness, haunted by those inner demons, having faced that basic first question of human survival and been tempted to turn stones into bread, then promised all the power and glory one might care to imagine, Jesus is now drawn *out* of the wilderness into the heart of community, into an urban wilderness – not quite a concrete jungle, but the physical, emotional and spiritual mayhem of Jerusalem.

... to the precincts of the Temple itself, the very highest corner of the compound, to take that scary look down over the parapet into the ‘valley of judgement’ below. There could hardly be a better location for what is to take place. “Throw yourself down!... the angels will bear you up!... *if*, that is, you really *are* the Son of God!... and if they don’t, no matter, you’ll have been deluding yourself anyway.”



It doesn’t take psychology to tell us that a busy city can be a very lonely place. Standing there on what was known as the pinnacle of the Temple... with all the connotations of that valley beneath – a burial ground for prophets of old to one side and, just round the corner, the aching reminders of days of child sacrifice in the Valley of Hinnom, at that time a stinking rubbish tip, known to us in the Gospels as Gehenna, the place of hell.

How many had tramped through the noisy maze of narrow streets and, in depths of despair, trodden warily through the Temple courts to this corner, to contemplate suicide from this spot? Even if the temple courts were bustling with life, how oppressive could those crowds become? But here, a quiet corner to slip away, maybe unnoticed; who knows?

An isolated corner in the most crowded place in Palestine, a fitting battleground for a man feeling truly estranged from the rest of humanity, wrestling with such different inner priorities and confronting his deepest fears and potential weaknesses, in order to overcome all other potential confrontations that he may meet on the journey ahead of him.



It is the depth of that very sense in Jesus of being *chosen*, that conviction of being set apart for a purpose under God, that gives Satan - this inner voice - the power to strike deep within the very ground of Jesus’ being.

Working with ordinands, I saw many times both the strengths and the dangers of that sense of calling; indeed, I have experienced both in myself. One gets a sense fairly quickly as to whether the upper hand in that sense of vocation has come to fruition through a person’s love of church life and all that goes with it, or whether it comes through a loving encounter with Christ through the Gospel itself – and that distinction can be vitally important. You need both, if you’re going to survive within the Institution of the Church! But it’s often far from clear to the person themselves, where that sense of vocation is springing from – and that’s maybe no bad thing either, for this is something to be discerned within the corporate Body of the Church.



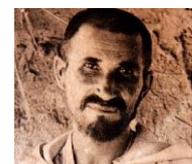
What is clear – and has been for a very long time – is that there can often be a fine line between the inner spark of a vocation and common forms of mental instability. Van Gogh classically speaks to us of the inner agony of his perceived vocation as pastor and missionary being rejected, having that passionate zeal for the Gospel as a young man.



Many people can be driven by a deep desire to follow in Christ's footsteps, seeking to make a difference in this world, and to win that promised crown of life – though many of us would never admit it and may not even be aware of it – to win the *glory*, achieve visible success, in the eyes of the world, not just of God; we may strive hard, very hard, but we may also deceive ourselves into thinking this is a response to the call from God, when it is very much the voice of the self, with something to prove to others; and we forget that it is only *by Christ working in us* that we will achieve anything of real truth or lasting value; we cannot do it of ourselves. As the preacher says, 'All is vanity.'



Sometimes it may only be the challenge of real desert that sorts out the inner voices from true vocation. I come back to Carlo Carretto and his inspiration, Charles de Foucault. Both spent many years in the Sahara in western Algeria.



At Beni Abbes, swathes of huge sand dunes abut stony desert and there Charles de Foucault, a Trappist monk and former map maker with the Foreign Legion, settled alongside the Tuareg people who didn't know where their next meal was coming from, and neither did he. He had spent a couple of years living in a garden hut in the grounds of a convent in Nazareth, seeking to be close to, and come to a deeper understanding of Christ's hidden life in Nazareth. During that time he had been shocked by the depth of poverty he encountered, not least in Syria.

"I no longer want a monastery which is too secure," he said. "I want the house of a poor workman who is not sure if tomorrow he will find work and bread, who with all his being shares the suffering of the world... like your home in Nazareth, Jesus, in which to live hidden as you did when you came among us."

Was he mad? His desert retreat, however poverty-stricken, was not to be a simple escape, either for him or for his followers. Rather, it has become a place for clarifying of what is important in life; a place for wondering at the immensity of creation and the power of God – and the littleness of human endeavour that, no matter how clever we become, will always be outdone by nature. It has become a place for listening for that call of God, to respond out of compassion – not to seek to achieve great things in anyone's name, self, church or of anything else, but in simple compassion for those in need.

For it is not cleverness that makes the universe work, it is love – and love alone. Even if we do not have it in *our* hearts, we will still find it within the heart of God. So people who retreat into the desert find themselves sent back to address the needs of those in *other* wildernesses in life.

Ultimately, the goal is not retreat, but to take that gift of contemplation of God's glory into the streets of everyday life... so as *not* to find oneself stuck in despair on the pinnacle of any solitary place, cornered *into* retreat with no escape; but turned about and able to face the world and say to that inner voice, 'This world belongs to God, who is love. And so do I. And because God so loved the world, and gave his only Son that we may have life, we too are given strength and power to face every challenge in this world without fear.

the one thing we owe absolutely to God is never to be afraid of anything.

So the task becomes contemplation in the streets. You will find the Little Brothers of Jesus – the followers of Charles de Foucault – in the hidden places; they have even been known to work out their vocation as prisoners in gaol, incognito, so as to live genuinely alongside those most in need. You will find the Little Sisters of Br Charles in the heart of the Old City of Jerusalem, marking that 6th Station of the Cross where Veronica wipes the face of Jesus, living among the hubbub, bringing the gift of love.

And we are encouraged to find a little piece of desert in life, a place of solitude – even if it is the bathroom – where we can take refuge for a few minutes, to hold our world before God and pray the blessing of God’s love.

On the pinnacle of the Temple, Satan quotes Psalm 91 at Jesus – “God will give his angels charge over you... they shall bear you in their hands, lest you dash your foot against a stone.” It is the great psalm of Compline, the evening office of lying down to take our rest; the office of laying ourselves in God’s hands when we lay down that last time to rest in eternity.



It is a psalm of entrusting ourselves to God’s care, in which we should feel we rest secure. Yet that ‘inner voice’ can even turn this around and turn us in on ourselves.”Go on... push yourself! Trust harder and *prove* that you are children of God!”

But let us, with the angels, simply say, ‘God is love!’; then, rather than put God to the test, perhaps we too can also endeavour to pray with Br Charles,

‘Father, I abandon myself into your hands; do with me what you will. Whatever you may do, I thank you. I am ready for all, I accept all; let only your will be done in me, and in all your creatures; I ask no more than this, O Lord. Into your hands I commend my soul; I offer it to you with all the love of my heart, for I love you Lord, and so need to give myself, to surrender myself into your hands, without reserve and with boundless confidence, for you are my Father.’

