

Lent 1 Year C, Culloden

Readings

Deut.26.1-11, Romans 10.8b - 13, Luke 4.1-13

'When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time'. And St Luke tells us about that 'opportune time' in Chapter 22 of his Gospel, when the devil enters into Judas Iscariot, who is unable to resist the temptation and betrays his Master. A sharp warning to all of us, that giving into temptation is a betrayal, and it ties today's readings on the first Sunday in Lent to the events of Maundy Thursday - we actually get the reading from St John's Gospel on the Wednesday of Holy Week - 'Satan entered into him . . . so, after receiving the piece of bread he immediately went out. And it was night' (Judas giving way to the powers of darkness). And this is a reminder that you cannot separate Jesus' life from his death; the cross doesn't come out of the blue, as a sign of a magical relationship between God and his sinful people - the cross comes as a consequence of Jesus' engagement with the evil of the world, what St Paul calls 'the powers and principalities'. This temptation story, right at the beginning of Lent, provides the context within which we should approach the crucifixion

during Lent. Jesus' engagement with, and resistance to, the powers of the world are here embodied in a figure we call the devil, or Satan. These are the powers of the world which hold people in captive - life destroying not life giving; the powers which reduce us to saying 'but there is nothing I can do about it'. Characterised by violence and domination, the powers seek to have their way at any cost - even the cost of crucifixion. And these are the powers that Jesus encounters in the wilderness and the same powers he has to resist throughout his ministry. The wilderness is a place of encounter - an encounter with self and all that is not of God within us. Israel had wandered in the wilderness for forty years and been found wanting, time and time again. Now the new Israel, in the person of Jesus, having spent forty days in the wilderness, is tempted - and what we see is resistance. We learn what he will not do; what kind of king he will not be; the means he will not take; the ends he will not use. The mission of Jesus, into which he has just been baptised, begins with resistance to the powers of this world; it begins with a resolute NO.

And in today's reading three particular temptations are described. Firstly, he refuses to use his powers to secure his

own survival, to meet his own needs, to satisfy his body. 'One does not live by bread alone' - a quote from the Book Deuteronomy, from the exile story; the full quotation is 'one does not live by bread alone, but by every word which comes from the mouth of God'. And of course we are here to be fed not only on the Bread of Life, but also by God's word. Jesus says NO to making his own survival the top priority and to using his power to meeting his own needs or wants; a lesson many including many political leaders need to learn today.

Secondly, the devil invites Jesus to use his power to establish a political empire grounded in the way of the world - domination and violence. Again, Jesus says NO. In fact, his NO to the path of domination and violence runs through not only these temptation stories but through the whole narrative of his ministry. The only weapon he uses is again the word of God. Finally the devil himself turns to Scripture to tempt Jesus, quoting from Psalm 91 - 'for it is written . . .' But Psalm 91, as we have read it this morning, is a Psalm of trust, not of testing. So even the Bible, misquoted or distorted, can be used as an instrument of the Powers and the Principalities; and Jesus will not use God to gain popularity, to seek success. You can hear the

slidey voice - 'Come on; God will protect you; the Scripture says so. Use God just this one time as a means to your personal goals'. It is a temptation often used at a national level - 'the war is going badly - call a day of prayer - make God the servant of our national aims'. We have seen that distorted to the nth degree by the so-called ISIS. NO. Jesus will not use God for his own ends. Faithfulness and obedience are more important than providing 'proof' of who he is. And so the conclusion is inevitable. The powers must crucify Jesus because he says NO to their ways; he threatens their authority; he challenges their most basic values of domination and violence. Here in the temptation stories we see the fundamental conflict, a conflict we must all grapple with, - the conflict between the way of God and the way of the powers, between the way of life and the way of death.

And really that seems to be that, all I can say - and yet There seems to me to be a fourth temptation woven into this story - one I have never, as far as I remember heard anyone preach about - and we hear it twice - 'If you are the Son of God'. 'If you are the Son of God'.

It is the Temptation to doubt; to doubt that God is your loving Father. Even if you are a cradle Christian and have never thought

about being anything else - this is a temptation - even in neglect. It is a temptation which must be faced. What is your identity in God? What is your relationship with God? Is God someone, - something, you encounter, or don't encounter, on Sunday mornings when nothing else prevents you coming to church? Is God with you every day of the week, every hour of the day, surrounding you with love, asking for your trust, calling you to imitate his Son, saying NO to the powers and principalities of this world, whether you call those powers the devil, satan, evil - or 'just the way things are and I can't do anything about it'? But you can do something about it, and it all begins with prayer.

'He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High abides under the shadow of the Almighty'.

This does not save us from temptation, guarantee no harm will come to us, ensure we have no pain - Jesus suffered all of those things - we, and He, repeatedly doubt, question, wonder, and trust and rejoice and give thanks.

The cross is a direct consequence of Jesus' resistance to the powers of evil and death in the world.

And between temptation and crucifixion, as members of the Body of Christ, we must examine our own lives of resistance, our ability to say NO, during this season of Lent.

I commend to you the keeping of a holy Lent. Amen.