



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 18th February 2024

Readings: *Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25; Mark 1.9-15*

Lent I

Ours is an inquisitive generation, given more opportunities than ever to learn and discover. We still have, of course, all the books, but now we also have the internet, which, with but six taps of the keyboard, gets us to *Google*, and there we can find out that the internet has at least 175 zettabytes of data, or if you prefer to think in gigabytes then that's 175 trillion gigabytes of data. Now, having just taken delivery of a new bottle of Quink ink, I'm not too sure about gigabytes, but 175 trillion gigabytes of data sounds like a whole lot of facts for an inquisitive generation.

Boundless sources of information ... and still we are trying to discover God. Some of us have been looking for God for decades, and are still wondering where God is some have just begun and have tantalising snippets and long for more; some have had a pause to wander away, or to be absorbed by other demands. But by sitting here this morning, are we not intimating a willingness to learn more of God? And so we can, if we want to. We are not here to boast of our brilliance, or to clock up another achievement, less still to pretend we are virtuous because the attendance register has our name in it Sunday by Sunday. Just to learn and grow. As Einstein reputedly said, 'I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious.'

Simon Peter was quite a seeker. Often, he let himself down, but on one famous occasion he was spot on. St Matthew tells us of how Jesus asked him 'who do you say that I am?' 'You are the Messiah', he replies.¹ He has discerned the whole point of Jesus, summed up by Stephen Cherry as Peter realising that 'Jesus is the chosen or 'anointed' one, who has been sent to set God's people free.' But Dr Cherry, who even now may be celebrating the holy mysteries nearby in King's College Chapel, goes on to say this about Peter:

*'... this is one of the very rare occasions where the apostle Peter gets something right. Mostly he gets things wrong. And yet it is Peter who becomes the leader of the disciples after the death of Jesus. This is symbolic of the profound significance of ongoing learning in the Christian tradition.'*²

Just as Peter embodies ongoing learning whilst walking with Christ, so might we. There is no need to feel we are inadequate or unworthy, nor that we are unwelcome to be those seeking God in Jesus. Our blunders in life and even in the church, far from being signs that we are not up to it, are crucial learning points that send us onwards, wiser and with a richer experience of the saving power of God.

And so to those temptations. Whenever I hear Mark's rather short version of Jesus being driven into the wilderness for forty days, two things come to my mind. I wonder in what sort of car he is driven by the Spirit, only to remember that of course it's a vintage Rolls Royce *Silver Ghost*. But then Mark's two-verse brevity points me to St Luke's thirteen-verse more detailed account of the temptations of Jesus, where we find much from which to learn about who Jesus is.³

In the first temptation, we discover that when Jesus is tempted to feed his physical hunger, as if that is all that required for abundant life, he understands that no hunger is fully satisfied until he opens himself to the presence of God.

In the second temptation, we discover that when Jesus is tempted to lust after status and power for himself, he makes clear that the essentials of life are to worship God, and to serve God by serving those amongst whom we are set. That is what offers the status and power that make the world go round.

And thirdly, in these temptations to which Jesus is subjected, we discover that when Jesus is tempted to throw himself from atop the temple, trusting that God will preserve him, he responds that such putting

¹ Matthew 16.16

² Cherry, Stephen 2017 *God Curious: exploring eternal questions* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers pages 81f

³ Luke 4.1-13

of God to the test in grandiose gestures is nothing to do with faith. Faith in God is about quietly, consistently, and credibly revealing God's love in how he lives, and God's truth in what he says in his forthcoming work through the streets of Galilee, and into the gardens of Jerusalem.

Moreover, we learn that as Jesus faces each of the three temptations, what enables him to be so wise, and also to be strong enough to resist the temptations, is what he hears from God through the Scriptures in which he has been steeped from childhood.

Yes, there is so much to learn about Jesus from the way he handles temptation. It's almost as if this story is another Epiphany moment for us, following after the visit of the Magi, the Baptism of Christ, and the wedding at Cana, the Transfiguration – each one helping us with our 'ongoing learning', whatever our stage of faith, and however 'passionately curious' we are, until, with Peter, we recognise him as our Messiah – the one who comes to set us and all creation free, fulfilling the covenant. God's beloved, worth listening to.

Before I close, however, these temptations of Jesus do not only teach us something about who *he* is. Might they not be instructive for who *we* are, and how we might best live - how we might deal with temptation? As Lent begins, with its invitation to 'clean up' our lives, the temptations of Jesus tell of things to which we can still fall prey, and of which in Lent we can repent, because the Lord is merciful.

The first temptation invites us, too, to rediscover that we will not have abundant life with a diet of bread alone – of possessions, of wealth, of achievements. They are not wrong; they are not to be eschewed. But they are not enough. 'Our hearts are restless till they rest in God.'⁴ The God that we, too, find revealed in those Scriptures consuming which we hear of the Word made flesh and dwelling among us full of the grace that characterises God, and of the truth that defines God.⁵

Influenced by Jesus' second temptation, we, too, can rediscover the folly of thinking we will flourish by winning power and position in order to lord it over other people. Only as we have the mind that was in Christ, the One who came to serve, will we thrive. How telling it was that at the outset of the King's coronation last May, in an unprecedented innovation for such occasions, an eleven year old lad asked him, 'Your Majesty, as children of the Kingdom of God we welcome you in the name of the King of Kings.' And he replied, 'In his name, and after his example, I come not to be served but to serve.'⁶

And the third of the devil's attempted deceptions surely teaches *us* as much as it taught Jesus, that faith in God is not about tricking God or catching out God. It's not about bargaining with God, saying, 'if You do this, I'll do that,' less still, 'I've done this, so now You do that'. No, the authentic Christian life, whether it is lived out on the till at Tesco's, on the front line in Gaza, or changing nappies in the middle of the night, is about quietly, consistently, credibly revealing God's love in how we live, and God's truth in what we say.

So, as we continue our life-long search for God, life's temptations can teach us about God and about ourselves as God's people. And let's not forget the best discovery of all: however tirelessly we look for God, the real good news is that God comes looking for us in Jesus Christ. God is with us. We are God's; nothing can separate us from God. Best of all is that 'love has found us.'⁷ Let every rainbow remind us of that. Amen

N. P. Uden
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⁴ St Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* Chapter 1

⁵ cf John 1.14

⁶ The Coronation Service for His Majesty King Charles III, 6th May 2023

⁷ Pratt Green, Fred from the hymn, *For the fruits of all creation*, RS 42.3.8