

The Temptation of Jesus...

... Who do you think you are?

A sermon given on the First Sunday of Lent, 6th March 2022, by the Curate the Revd Dr Tim Kelly, in Beverley Minster

Luke 4:1-13

Although it was 30 years ago, I can still remember it clear as day: I can remember where I was standing; I can remember the atmosphere in the room; the noise; the smell; I remember exactly how it felt. Picture me as a fresh-faced undergraduate in his first week of University. Now, having previously not been the most outgoing of sorts, I had quelled all my apprehensions and summoned all of my energies to visit the College bar for the very first time. Inexperienced as I was in pub or bar etiquette and nervous about getting it right, I approached the bar with a crisp five pound note in my hand and tried to get the attention of the bar staff - with not much luck, I needed to get a little bit closer. And then it happened. As I moved forward, I knocked the elbow of a third year student. He turned round and with supreme self-assuredness and superiority, he sneered down his nose and said to me, "And who exactly do you think you are?" Flustered apologies from me. I don't think I actually said "Who, me? I'm nobody, really." But I might as well have done. In comparison to his what seemed like six foot three stature, I felt about 2 centimetres tall.

'Who do you think you are?' is perhaps one of the most significant questions that you can be asked. And it was safe to say in that first week of University, I wasn't necessarily in one of the best places to answer that question when it was sneered to me in the College bar. Who was I? I was away from home, away from family and friends that I've grown up with. At school, I'd been known as one of the clever ones, but even that now seemed to be in doubt - there seemed to be lots of clever people around me. Who was I? And still working that out would have been the honest answer. Sometimes it's only after you experience some testing, some struggle, and work out the decisions you'll take and the choices that you make that you really start to learn what kind of person you are.

And this is perhaps what we see in Jesus and his experience in today's reading. In Lent we remember this period of Jesus in the wilderness that follows immediately after his baptism. And although it's very tempting to superficially relate Jesus'

temptation by the devil with our own ability or inability to resist the temptation of that glass of wine or that bar of chocolate that we've decided to give up for Lent, it's fair to say that there are much bigger issues at stake here. Jesus, the Son of Man, begotten of the Father, God made man, is working out exactly who he was - working this out in relation to all the things that he could be and in his answers to the challenges and questions posed. Was he the kind of man to use his power to make life more comfortable? Was he the kind of man to Lord his authority and demonstrate his power over others? Was he the kind of man that would be obedient to God or test him? This was truly a formational time. At his baptism, he had already had the affirmation of that voice from heaven, *"This is my Son in whom I am well pleased."* But the human side of Jesus had to work out what it meant to be God's Son in this special, unique way. What kind of Messiah was he to be? And of course, we see that Jesus succeeds where others have failed. Jesus the new Adam succeeds where Adam and Eve fails when tempted by the serpent's lies in the Garden of Eden. Jesus, the Son of God, succeeds where Israel, the people who were declared as God's sons his first born after coming through the Red Sea, and who grumbled and complained, followed idols, and continually tested God as they wandered in the wilderness. He succeeds not by drawing on his own reserves, but by drawing upon the word of God as written in Scripture, and in time, as we approach Easter, we will learn afresh how Jesus didn't just succeed for himself but on behalf of us all. But for now we are in the proving ground of the wilderness. And it's a proving ground that all of us still encounter daily. Each of us still encounters the lies spoken to us, sometimes loudly, sometimes as gentle as a whisper, "You'll be happy if You'll be free if ... It doesn't matter if...." And we have to choose how to respond.

St. Thomas Aquinas talked of the three enemies of the soul, the world, the flesh, and the devil: The world is indifferent to God's side - our adoption of empty passing values; the flesh, our corrupt inclinations, and sometimes disordered passions; and the devil, the Father of lies - who in Aquinas's words, 'Labours in relentless malice to twist us away from salvation.' Lies are spoken over us and spoken to us daily from all three sources. And in their presence we must decide exactly what kind of people are we. And as Jesus says in Matthew chapter seven, "By their fruit shall you know them", by our choices and actions will people come to know who we are and who we follow?

Lies are being spoken over entire nations at present. Justification for war and violence can be built upon lies that have the ear and the mind of world leaders. We are seeing at first hand how powerful, how persuasive and how destructive ideas can be. And these lies that justify wars must be replaced with truth. This week we see that alongside the physical violence and bloodshed, another battle rages for the control of the media, for control of the message that is fed directly to the people of Russia.

What we learn from Jesus is how lies must be defeated, how evil must be defeated. And if that's to happen, it must first be defeated at the most personal and intimate level. Sometimes we can make the mistake of thinking that if we outwardly appear to do the right thing and what we do in private doesn't matter. But this is the lie encountered by Jesus in the solitude of the desert. If Jesus couldn't win his battle there, then what hope is there to win the battle outside of the desert, when he would be tested at every level and even to the point of death? Similarly, the defeating of lies in the world starts with the defeating of lies in our own lives and hearts. We are not Jesus and we will be tempted differently, but all of us will be tempted in ways that challenge our own calling, our own ministry, and our own vocation. Resisting temptation is not about denying oneself, but is about fulfilling the potential of who we are truly called to be.

So when we hear the question, 'Who exactly do you think you are?' - as Jesus did, follow and trust in the promises spoken over you: let it be said you are a beloved child of Christ. Seek his wisdom as daily we each endeavour for ourselves to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly - just as we would long the world to do.

Reading Texts

Luke 4:1-13

¹ Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³ The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' ⁴ Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone." ' ⁵ Then the devil* led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' ⁸ Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." ' ⁹ Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you", ¹¹ and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." ' ¹² Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." ' ¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.