

Lent 1

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew, Guernsey, on Sunday 10 March 2019

Readings: Deuteronomy 26.1-11 and Luke 4.1-13

One of the most beautiful services in the Anglican liturgy is Compline, also known as Night Prayer – the late evening service, at its most hauntingly beautiful when sung to ancient chants in the semi-darkness of a church. Compline means simply ‘completion’. It is a service of quietness and reflection before one turns in for the night.

In its older form, the service begins with a simple prayer, ‘The Lord almighty grant us a quiet night and a perfect end’, which is followed by a short reading from the first letter of St Peter: ‘Brethren, be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: whom resist, steadfast in the faith.

Even if we do not find it easy to perceive evil personified, such as the illustrations of the devil in the manuscripts and wall paintings from mediaeval times, or in the rather dramatic language of St Peter, we cannot easily dismiss the reality of evil. And even closer to home, we delude ourselves if we kid ourselves that we are not open to temptations of one sort or another from time to time.

St Paul is nothing but uncomfortably honest when he writes to the Christians in Rome, ‘I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.’

This, I suggest, is why the temptation of Jesus, which we revisit every year on the first Sunday of Lent, and this year in the words of St Luke, is so important. The most significant difference between the Christian faith and other religions is simply that Jesus, whom we believe to be the Son of God, ‘of one being with the Father’ in the words of the Nicene Creed, was born in human form of the Virgin Mary and lived amongst human beings before his crucifixion, death and resurrection. Jesus is, uniquely, both divine and human. It is in the temptations which Jesus faces, so soon after his baptism, that we see the tension between the two sides of Jesus’ nature held so acutely.

Jesus’ journey into the wilderness was a test. And like most tests, he was stripped of all his props and resources. He could reply only on his inner resources. Faced with the incredible temptations of his human frailty, he was offered the easiest defence against that frailty: the ability to control – to create food where there is none, to rule with power, to defy his physical nature. But instead, Jesus stood firm, clothed only with thankfulness, trust, and humility. He resisted, above all, the temptation to manipulative control. And that tells us something important about God. Thankful for the nourishment that is not food, trusting in the God that does not need testing, and humble enough to obey the law given him by his ancestors and inspired by God, Jesus resisted temptation and in doing that prepared himself to begin his ministry.

But I was struck, in preparing this sermon, by a phrase I have read countless times, without previously considering its significance or its meaning. It is the last verse in

today's gospel reading. 'When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.'

If we think that Jesus had vanquished evil once and for all by how he dealt with the temptations, we must think again. For that, we need to wait for Good Friday.

So what, then, was the 'opportune time'?

On this first Sunday of Lent, we are invited to look across the weeks towards the climax of Holy Week. Jesus ate the Last Supper with his disciples, on the day we know as Maundy Thursday because of one of the elements of Jesus' teaching to his disciples in those last hours that he spent with them before the all-transforming events of Good Friday and Easter Day. Then, with the disciples, Jesus went to Gethsemene where there is another set of struggles and trials. It is not fanciful to see in the intense struggles in Gethsemene another experience of the wilderness temptations. It is an opportune time when Jesus is, in human terms, at his weakest. But it is in that human weakness that God is most active, as we will see when we stand at the foot of the cross on Good Friday.

You know what are the temptations to which you are most vulnerable. You know the truth and reality for yourself of what St Paul says of himself: 'I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate'. That is a matter between you and God, unless you think that those close to you can help you to withstand the temptations with which you wrestle.

Heavenly Father, your Son battled with the powers of darkness, and grew closer to you in the desert: help us to use these days to grow in wisdom and prayer that we may witness to your saving love in Jesus Christ our Lord.¹

¹ Alternative collect for the first Sunday of Lent in Common Worship