

## Sermon preached at King's College Cambridge

February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2016 - Lent 1

Luke 4.1-11

*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit... was led by the Spirit in the wilderness.*

A few years ago I spent a week in the Holy Land, in Israel/Palestine. One cold, dry, fine morning we were driven along a road north out of Jerusalem. After what seemed a very short journey the bus pulled off the road. We walked over a low hill, dotted with Bedouin men smoking and checking their mobile phones, and suddenly found ourselves in the Judean desert.

It's a desert of sharp, mountainous hills, and dry flinty rock. This is not a desert of picture-book sand dunes. Our pilgrimage leader said 'go and find somewhere to sit on your own and be quiet.'

This was the desert landscape in which Jesus faced his demons. It's a landscape which has an effect on you. It's not just a beautiful backdrop against which you can think beautiful thoughts, or even challenging thoughts. Only a few minutes' walk from the road and you can see nothing but those lacerated slopes, and tiny thin ribbons of ancient goat-herding tracks. All you can hear is the breeze, the faint tinkling of goat bells... and the silence.

This silence is not just the absence of noise. It's a dense, thick silence. It's a silence which has presence, and character. And it can be quite overwhelming. It might be that silence of the still, small voice of God himself. It might be the silence of what the great Trappist mystic Thomas Merton called 'a point of pure truth' inside us, 'like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven'<sup>1</sup>. It's also the kind of enveloping, soul-searching silence into which the serpentine demons of temptation can insinuate themselves.

This season of Lent is not about the Church telling you to face up to your misdemeanours and your bad habits, saying sorry and making good resolutions for the future. It is more like a gracious gift of time in which to pull off the road and go into the desert, and give way to the piercing regard of silence. And there are real desert places, close to home. We all have them, we can all find them, if we dare to imagine and remember, and the season of Lent is when we must go there.

This has to begin in solitude. And it does need us to take time, to make time. Somehow we have to immerse ourselves in the kind of silent solitude which the Judean desert would best make possible. We have to summon up a quality of attentiveness in which we can expose our hearts and minds to the penetrating but forgiving scrutiny of God's still, small voice.

This is not a generalised thing, either, but painstakingly particular. That still, small voice may get through and have something specific to say. We may hear a tiny, insistent voice of love wondering at, say, our material obsessions. What is this devotion to things, to getting things? Perhaps we need our hearts of stone turned into hearts that will give bread to the hungry.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander'

Going into our desert place takes strength, by which I mean we need to dare to take the strength that is offered to us. That is grace. And part of the strength comes from an assurance about why we can dare to do this at all. We can dare to do this because of something that we learn from Jesus' own temptations; something we learn from what it was for Jesus to have been tempted at all. There is something remarkable to remember here; something fundamental to our moral self-understanding.

We talk readily of Christ's temptations. He was tempted to use his divinely miraculous power to feed himself in a time of fasting, in a place where there was no food; he was tempted to secure worldly power and glory by following the way of darkness; and he was tempted to provoke divine intervention to save himself from self-inflicted death.

But we also believe in the sinlessness of Christ. It is fundamental. Though tempted he remained free of sin. The amazing and liberating discovery we make, then, is that temptation is not the same as doing the wrong thing. If Christ's temptations were meaningful, he had to be attracted to those wrongful courses of action. It was more than just a rational understanding that these actions were theoretically possible. They had desirable, alluring qualities for him. Yet he remained sinless.

For us, then, liberation comes in discovering that the allure of wrongdoing is not sinful, not something for which we are responsible. Responsibility (the clue's in the word) begins in our response to this allure – do we submit to the temptation, do we even titillate ourselves with thoughts of such wrongdoing? Temptation is visited upon us, it does not originate within us. This is a great, uplifting revelation in the story of Christ's temptations.

This is one of the great gifts of God to us, his creatures. It belongs to that constellation of human characteristics which spring from our being made in God's image, our being made with that tiny spark that Thomas Merton talks about.

As we take time in Lent to discover or rediscover that diamond-like divine point within ourselves, one of the things we rediscover is the unearned mercy of God. Part of his creative and sustaining glory is this quality of mercy, which is inexhaustible. And this mercy in turn empowers our own mercy and compassion.

For contemplation must lead to compassion. We go into our desert places in Lent in order to come out of them. The very real need in Lent to withdraw to the solitude and silence of contemplation and self-examination must come to fruition in real acts of love and mercy. As the poet Maya Angelou says, 'nobody can make it out here alone'<sup>2</sup>. There will always be, to quote Merton one last time, there will always be 'the lonely other who seeks God through you'<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Alone'

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Dom Francis Decroix, 1967