

## Three temptations

Luke 4.1-13

Back in the 1990s I applied for a post in the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich, and was shortlisted. Interestingly all of us who were on the shortlist withdrew, because we thought the job was impossible. Part of it was a Diocesan post, but 2 ½ days were to be in charge of three or four village parishes, including Helmingham, where the church lies next to the stately home occupied by the Tollemache family. When I looked round that magnificent church, there was no obvious sign that it was used for anything – let alone worship – no hymn books, notices or anything. I don't know whether it was one of my fellow-candidates, but the last entry in the Visitor's Book read 'To the glory of the Tollemaches and in loving memory of God.'

That church came back into my mind as I thought about today's Gospel. Because one of the most remarkable things in that church is that the walls are decorated with graffiti – not ancient wall paintings, but c.19<sup>th</sup> biblical texts, written in large red gothic script. They are apparently the way in which the then incumbent John Charles Ryle, who later became the first Bishop of Liverpool, and the then Lady Tollemache conducted a feud. They shouted texts at each other – in writing two feet high!

That got me thinking, as I reflected on Jesus' temptations, which we have just heard about, that in that story there are warnings about three temptations we might be prey to. The first is what Ryle and Lady Tollemache did – they misused and abused the Bible, using verses as weapons to back up their point of view. Jesus gave us a good example of how pointless that is in the last of the temptation we heard about. The Devil quotes scripture, and Jesus counters it with another scripture. People have continued to play that game ever since. In all the current debates in General Synod about same sex relationships, plenty of that kind of thing has gone on. What people seem to do is to take bits and pieces of biblical text which support what they want to think, and quietly ignore the rest. Devout people who want a very clear definition of what relationships can and cannot be forget for example the fact that several of the patriarchs were polygamous, and are never condemned for being so. Matthew's genealogy of Jesus includes amongst his ancestors Rahab, who was a prostitute. Selective shouting of verses gets no-one anywhere – I don't think it was why Ryle was made a Bishop! That is serious enough in terms of debate. It can also be a matter of life and death. From time to time we hear of members of the Jehovah's Witnesses refusing blood transfusions, with tragic consequences. Their no doubt sincere belief is entirely founded on a maverick interpretation of a single verse in Genesis, which by any rational view can have nothing to do with blood transfusions, since the concept would have been science fiction (had science fiction existed in those days) to the writer of Genesis. Probably one of our problems stems from having verses at all. Stephen Langton, back in 1205 divided the Bible up into Chapters. He was then a

Professor in Paris, but later became Archbishop of Canterbury. It was another Parisian - Robert Stephanus who completed the job with verses (31,102, if you are interested) and they started appearing in editions of the Bible from the early c.16<sup>th</sup>. It is very useful to be able to pin down where something was written – but it has led people to stop reading things in context, and to plucking things out of the air. In our days of sound-bites, we have a particular temptation in this regard. So maybe part of the answer to that temptation we all face is to learn to read the Bible in bigger chunks. Why not, this Lent read some of Paul's epistles – but read one at a sitting, and get the flow of the argument as a whole. Ignore the verse and chapter numbers, and read them for what they are – letters.

A second temptation for us which I think is pointed up in the story of Jesus' temptations is to think, however vaguely, that if we have God on our side, then we will be able to avoid problems. If only we have enough faith, then nasty things will not happen to us. Christians will not be caught in train or plane accidents. They will not get infected by blood contaminated with HIV or whatever. There is a lot of pious rubbish spouted in this way by people who should know better. The sweep of the Biblical story could almost be summarised in that verse from Psalm 23 – 'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.' God didn't protect his people from having bad times. But he was with them in and through the bad times. And slavery in Egypt and forced exile in Babylon, both of which lasted for generations, really were bad times. Because we believe, it doesn't mean we get a special deal. We are not upgraded to some 1<sup>st</sup> class cabin journey through life. We have to cope with the ordinary slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. But the promise is that we are not alone. We heard Luke's version of the temptation stories. Intriguingly, although he was almost certainly using Mark's Gospel as a model, he doesn't say what Mark, and Matthew also say at the end of the temptations – that 'angels came and ministered to him'. Jesus was not alone, but had to cope with really difficult and stressful times. The same applies to us. We are not alone either, and that makes all the difference. Maybe something we could do this Lent is consciously each morning to thank God that whatever happens that day, we are not alone.

And then there is the temptation to think that we don't need to spend time with God. And that isn't always a cosy experience. The story says that Jesus was 'led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness'. He wasn't tricked into being there by the Devil in the story – he was led there by God. In order that he could be clear about what God was calling him to do, he had to have a time to wrestle with other possibilities – of being a popular miracle-worker, of grabbing and using power for its own sake, of creating a situation in which faith is no longer possible because belief is enforced. What we heard was a very brief summary of how he dealt with those possibilities, and remained true to his real calling. But he needed to have that time. It was part of his spiritual journey. And he kept on going into desert places, or at least deserted places, to be alone to pray. That was a pattern, right up to the end, when he was alone praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. Do we think we are above all that? If Jesus needed to have time with God, and sometimes difficult times with God, then we certainly do. But there is a kind of

arrogance that easily infects us, and makes us think we needn't bother, or that we needn't bother very much. Lent is perhaps a time when we can give ourselves the kick up the backside which makes us think straight again. The great thing is not to be too ambitious. If you normally pray once a day, maybe you can pray twice, or you can extend your prayers by just a few minutes. If you only pray when there is a crisis, maybe you can find a few minutes more regularly to share your life with our heavenly Father. I have often told people that story of the actors on a McBrayne ferry caught in a storm on the way to the Hebrides. The luvvies plead with the Captain to pray for them – they are sure they will drown. His reply was: 'I say my prayers when it is calm, and when it's rough I attend to my ship.' And maybe all of us can learn to talk less when we pray, and just *be* with God. Maybe if we shut up for a while, he can get a word in edgeways.

Reading about Jesus' temptations may give us insights into what he is like. But his temptations are different from ours. What matters is that we grasp from the story the things that can help us with ours. And if mis-using the Bible, or thinking we have a special deal, or that we don't need time with God are not your particular temptations at this moment, then think about the things that *are* and in the time that you agree you have alone with God, ask him to show you how Jesus' example can help you deal with the things that threaten to make you get it all wrong. Because as sure as eggs are eggs, we all have things that do that for us.