

## Sunday 25 February 2007: The First Sunday of Lent

**“It is *matter* is the scaffolding of the spirit”**

**Deuteronomy 26.1-11; Luke 4.1-13**

When God created the heavens and the earth God saw that it was very good. And yet, we can get caught out by the ways in which we use the good material gifts God has given us. Here we are on the first Sunday of Lent and the Gospel reading is of Jesus spending forty days in the wilderness and being tempted as we are to misuse material things. The difference between him and us is that he withstood the temptations which are very powerful and universal, whereas sometimes we do not.

The late Fr Harry Williams CR once said that the seven deadly sins – pride, lust, avarice, gluttony, anger, envy and sloth – are the destructive excess of human qualities or characteristics we actually need to flourish.

Pride is a sense of self-worth gone to egotistical excess;  
lust the dominance of our sexuality which is essential to continue humanity and is also one of the key ways of building and sustaining loving personal relationships;  
we all need to rest but sloth is when idleness takes over and we get nothing creative done;  
and so on.

The temptations of Jesus in the wilderness are similar. Bread, political power and trust in God are all part of life but done to excess and they become evil, matter turned bad. This doesn't just corrupt the individual. *These* are temptations that would change the basis of the created order, changing our relationship with God and demeaning what it is to be human.

There is a world of difference between the sufficiency of praying, “Give us this day our daily bread” and having the power to turn the stones of the wilderness into bread. ‘Bread’ or ‘dough’ is now a metaphor for money and the temptation is that we would like the power of control over the material world. Never again would we be hungry in the wilderness; and we can kid ourselves that if we had this power the world would never again be hungry. But, also, never again would we be thankful for what God has provided.

When we first moved into Central London, I remember being struck that money and political influence are centred here as nowhere else in Britain. There are lots of people who use it well and there are also people who are self-serving and slick with it. We need people who exercise power well. What none of us need is politicians and rulers who are deluded into wanting omnipotence. It's no good for them and it's no good for the people they serve.

On Tuesday I am going to the memorial service for Lord Peyton of Yeovil. John Peyton was Edward Heath's Transport Minister and became an independently minded member of the House of Lords who befriended my predecessor and me. He used to say, “Parliament is a very democratic place and consequently there are as many”, and here I paraphrase, “unpleasant and untrustworthy people in Parliament as outside.”

Power can be very attractive and it has the great merit of getting things done. The archaeological remains of King Herod's buildings are fantastic and even Mussolini made the trains run on time. It's not just that absolute power corrupts the ruler absolutely, it prevents all of us from becoming mature, creative and responsible, fully human beings.

For those of us with religious faith, trust is at the core of our relationship with God, whom Jesus encouraged us to call Abba, 'Daddy'. But, Jesus replied to the tempter, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test". Probably we have all longed for God to be more evident, more obviously active. It might seem a marvellous proof if someone from St Martin's threw themselves off the top of the spire and God commanded an army of angels to fly into Trafalgar Square to scoop them up and protect them. Except that that would fundamentally breach the order of creation in which we are set with the personal freedom and responsibility to become moral. In such a world as this, God has to leave us to our own devices and take the consequences. It's easy to understand the temptation of putting God to the test but withstanding it is how we become human.

Jesus went into the wilderness "full of the Holy Spirit". That is a crucial introduction to this story. This 'scaffolding of the spirit' centred him and gave him the awareness of self and vocation that made possible a different response to temptation from every other human being. Withstanding the temptation to change the basis of his self-understanding and vocation, *and* the fundamental order of creation, is the acceptance that the way of love and truth may be personally sacrificial. Let's be clear, if Jesus had given in to these temptations, there would have been no crucifixion; and neither would there have been the resurrection and our entering in to the full humanity of Christ.

If today's Gospel shows the steely strength of Jesus's interior scaffolding of the Holy Spirit, the first reading from Deuteronomy gives an external framework of good habits that make us more human in response to the gifts of creation.

When you come into the (promised) land...take some of the first fruit of the ground...that the Lord your God is giving you" and place it in a basket before the altar as an offering to the Lord your God.

Not, see how it goes ad if you've got any left over when you've had enough, offer the surplus to God, but "*take some of the first fruit*" and offer it to God.

One of the donors to our building renewal project, a secular Jew, says that when he was setting up his first company with £5,000 in the 1950's, his solicitor told him to include a commitment that 10% of the profits must go into a charitable trust. At that stage he hadn't got any profits and had borrowed some of the money to get started, but the company profits have fed what is now a major charitable trust. It is impressive philanthropy, but the point is it was built in to the structure of the company *from the beginning*, not added on when the company had become successful. Most of us will never think we are successful enough to give away 10% of our profits to charity.

A Psychologist asked people what level of salary would make them happy. Regardless of how much people were earning, the answer was always just a bit more than I receive at present. So given our propensity for greed, it's a useful bit of scaffolding that structures our affairs in such a way as to get us in the habit of giving charitably *from the beginning*. Giving to God, or to others from the resources we have been given, is one of the things that makes us human.

In Deuteronomy, the injunction to be generous is linked with looking forwards *and* backwards, to the entrance to the promised land *and* with the memory of our needing to be looked after by others.

A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien...becoming a great nation...but being turned into slaves.

This is an experience that taught the Israelites they should love the stranger and not just their own people. So much of our affection is tribal, for our own kind, or our own family but actually, we need to learn to love the stranger, if only because we have known circumstances in which we were strangers and needed the love of others. It's an important piece of scaffolding in our religious story that structures this fundamental insight.

So, two sorts of scaffolding of the spirit in today's readings: that divine scaffolding of the Holy Spirit given to strengthen and equip Jesus going into the wilderness; and that external scaffolding built on the experience of the people of God and creating the habits that make us more human.

Reading R S Thomas's poem 'Emerging', from which we have taken the title for this year's Lent theme, I am struck by its simple and sometimes profoundly awkward Biblical insight that, "it is *matter* is the scaffolding of the spirit".