

A SERMON FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

A Reflection on the Temptations of Christ in the light of the Archbishop's Lecture on Civil and Religious Law in England

Matthew 4. 1-11 (Luke 4. 1-12)

Four days in and how is it going? Is the lid still resolutely on the chocolate biscuit tin? Is the alarm ringing reliably ten minutes earlier in the morning to allow for that more concentrated period of prayer or Bible reading (and the time being used as planned)? And what about that resolution to do a good deed daily, to show some kindness even to the most challenging and unrewarding? How's that going, I wonder?

One of the difficulties with Lent is the great array of temptations it brings to give up: to give up on whatever the Lenten disciplines may be that we have chosen, to give up and so to be conscious of failure. Indeed, we sometimes seem to see the whole purpose of Lent as a sort of test of our resolve to stick to it. We sometimes seem to enter into Lent as if it were no more than a six-week obstacle course of spiritual and physical challenges to be mastered or endured, so that we may prove to ourselves, others and God how strong we are by coming through the ordeal unscathed by failure, triumphantly having resisted the temptation to give in.

Such a view of Lent – as a moment's pause will confirm – has got to be disastrously and dangerously wrong, of course. Its danger is that of spiritual pride: if Lent is a sort of challenge then success in Lent becomes an achievement, something we have done rather than something done in us. It becomes a celebration of our ability and strength rather than anything about the working of God's grace in us. And that, surely, is to miss the whole point rather seriously!

So Lent is not about a test, and it's not about a challenge and it's not about resisting by our own heroic efforts the temptation to give in to our weaker natures. And this being the case you may want to wonder why we are given the famous story of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness to inspire us as our Gospel reading on the first Sunday of Lent?

It's a fair question and one that deserves a fair answer. And it may be that as we explore the question and wonder about the answer we may find ourselves touching on and opening up a whole lot more questions that are on our minds and in our hearts, most particularly precisely at this moment following the Archbishop of Canterbury's lecture at the end of last week and the storm of criticism with which it has been greeted.

Let's see how we get on with this, with the temptations of Jesus and what we make of them in the context of this season of fasting and reflection and in the context of the Archbishop's remarks and the reaction to them.

There's nothing very new in the observation that what we have in the Temptations story is a sort of acted parable for the process by which Jesus developed the priorities and characteristics of his ministry when this was still in the formative stage. Immediately after his baptism by John in the Jordan and before beginning his ministry of teaching and healing, with

the words of God (as it were) ringing in his ears – “*This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased*” – Jesus retreats into the wilderness for a period of fasting and reflection through which his ministry will take shape. Our season of Lent, with its characteristics of fasting, taking stock and prayerfully considering our life and calling before God, is undertaken consciously in imitation of this retreat by Jesus.

And the results of Jesus’ retreat and reflection about priorities and characteristics in his ministry is then presented to us by the Evangelists in the form of a threefold encounter with the Devil and his rejection of the three temptations the Devil offers him (as it were) to get his ministry *wrong*. These themes – temptations, which are one by one met and answered by Jesus – are, I suggest, the same themes (temptations to get ministry wrong) that the Church, that *we*, face day by day. For this reason quite apart from any other they are worthy of our careful consideration – and at this point it may well be that our consideration of them will provide a helpful framework in which to think about the Archbishop’s lecture about law, a plural society, cohesion and inclusion.

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The Devil’s first temptation is that Jesus should turn stone to bread – that he should, in effect, give the people what they want. Bread, of course, is a necessity in a hungry world and the person who provides it does a generous and important thing which commands respect and gratitude and – for as long as the supply keeps up – loyalty. And Jesus, as his ministry unfolds, understands this and is well aware of it and acts upon it. Think of the Five Thousand.

The Church, too, when she is being faithful and effective, knows that she must be about the meeting of need. If we’re not about feeding the hungry, binding up the broken and embracing the outcast we’re missing out on vital and central aspects of our calling.

But that’s not all there is to be said. Jesus was not *just* about giving people what they wanted: he rejected the temptation of the Devil to do this always, as symbolised in the making of stones into bread. If Jesus had been about giving the people what they wanted, of course, he would not have been crucified. And in the same way the Church sometimes needs to be ready to give the people what they *don’t* want, to say what folk don’t want to hear, to ask difficult questions, which many would prefer to leave unasked.

Which is, perhaps, what Rowan Williams was doing, at least in part – raising some of the hard issues that we would prefer to see left alone about how in a modern, complex and culturally diverse society within one nation we can accommodate and honour cultural differences, religious minorities within a secular state, even to the extent of admitting a degree of legal pluralism within one system for the sake of desirable inclusivity. (And that is *all* he was doing, let it be emphasised – and certainly not advocating the institution of Sharia Law either in place of or alongside the law of the land as established.) Certainly the unanimity and speed with which the political classes distanced themselves from him suggest that the Archbishop was not giving the people what they wanted but, rather, saying the unsayable, which means, of course, what people believe to be unheard!

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The second temptation (at least in Luke’s order, rather than Matthew’s version, set for today), when the Devil took Jesus up a high mountain and offered him dominion over the nations of

the world, is about political power. “Seize power,” the Devil seems to be saying, “salvation and success lie essentially in getting the politics – and that means the legal niceties, too, of course – right”. It’s a beguiling temptation, the basic assumption of which lies behind every political ideology ever developed, as we can see disastrously on every page of history but Jesus rejected it and in so doing disappointed a great many people, among them (perhaps) Judas Iscariot and others who wanted a political Messiah to get the political and legal systems right to bring about justice and peace – with the result that we know.

Rowan Williams’ critics have made much of the political impropriety (as they see it) of what he said. His suggestion that a single, undifferentiated and uniform legal system just may *not* be the sole, perfect and sufficient way of ensuring peace and stability in society has caused shock and outrage, particularly among those who believe that one legal system, the same for all, is the bedrock of one nation. This is a serious viewpoint, of course, well worthy of being argued and defended, but there’s a strong tradition in Christianity (think of the letters of St Paul) that is sceptical about the power of law to produce perfection in human society or in faithfulness to God. So there’s a debate to be had that the Archbishop has initiated and maybe that’s no bad thing. For the present, we may observe that Jesus rejected the temptation which was about seeking a perfect political system and the Archbishop has asked some sharp questions about a well entrenched constitutional (*ie* political) norm: perhaps that’s worthy of some serious and measured thought?

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And finally, in the third temptation – the antithesis, in a sense, of the last – the Devil urges Jesus to play the religious card, to reveal his divine status and power by flinging himself from the pinnacle of the Temple and waiting for the angels to save him. The temptation to retreat into holiness and away from the rough and tumble of ordinary worldly existence is always a temptation for Christian folk and Christian churches and it’s one that we need to be on our guard against.

The temptation is to see the world with its concerns about justice and power, its institutions and tensions, its diversity and divisions, as passing, transient and insubstantial things for *us*, who are godly people destined for and in essence belonging to heaven, which is somewhere well removed. Our priority on earth (according to this view) is to preserve our purity as best we can, having as little as possible to do with the corrupt, ungodly and unchristian (the words being synonymous) that is all around us. Such a view would certainly want no “Christian nation” to have any truck whatsoever with Sharia Law, for instance, whether in its gruesome, tabloid manifestations or even the more measured and creative applications in the areas of marriage and family (for instance) that the Archbishop was hinting at.

But Archbishop Rowan is challenging this view: the *whole* world (he is saying), and not just the Churchy, Christian bits, is God’s and therefore the concern of God’s people and legitimate to be commented on by one in a position such as his. The way we manage society, embrace difference, include all sorts of voices and viewpoints, give honour to strangers and the marginalised (including what the Bible calls “the stranger within our gates”) – all of this matters, even to the extent of affecting the way we shape and reshape some of our most precious traditions, in Civil Law as well as other areas.

Jesus, by rejecting the third temptation, is saying that his mission and ministry is *not* a purely religious thing, the interest purely of religious people: it’s bigger than that and encompasses

more than that. And *that*, of course, is uncomfortable for religious folk (like us) who think, however unconsciously, that it's all about us and our Church and culture whose preservation and protection must be at the centre of all that we do. There are plenty of religious folk among the shrillest of Archbishop Rowan's critics.

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So what – to go back to the beginning – *is* Lent all about? Is it about the biscuit tin, the extra bit of Christian kindness or witness, the Lent study or discussion group, the renewed determination in prayer and worship? And the answer is: Yes, all of that – but also more, much more.

We are used to thinking of Lent as a season of renewal and challenge in our personal and private lives and we know not to expect the process always to be easy or pain free. It may be that what Rowan Williams has done (at great cost to himself, let it be said, and sacrificial risk to his authority and dignity) is to remind us that renewal and challenge – with its discomfort and awkwardness – is also an experience that is to be embraced in our public and shared life, too. Powerful human instincts – like wanting to give people what they want, or relying on long-trusted but unchallenged political systems, or retreating to a religious ghetto that is apparently perfect but dangerously disconnected from the world – are deeply entrenched in our thinking. A Lent that encourages us to challenge them, as Jesus did the tempter in his wilderness experience, will not be comfortable but it will be health-giving, to the glory of God. Amen.