

Sermon preached by the Very Reverend Keith Jones Sunday 10 March 2019 – First Sunday of Lent (year C)

For forty days he was tempted by the devil. Luke 4 v 2

Lent invites us again to try to free ourselves from the father of lies. This is our season to question how far we connive in the powers that ruin the world and corrode our souls. This is a more testing thing than avoiding chocolates or strong drink, though the best acts of Lenten self denial are those which make us pause frequently among our habits and take stock of the way we conduct ourselves, and question especially the motivations which we prefer to overlook.

The Christian Lent is not negative. Being unhappy is not the point. We are abundantly blessed, and we carry in us the moments when we have realized that is so: in times when things have gone well, and when we have been consoled in the midst of adversity. That's what faith recognizes. And it's when we recognize that the grace of God has already supported us in employing powers beyond our own powers that we want more of that grace. We don't want to waste any more of it. We want to make ourselves more available to it. We want it to change us, because we want to exult in it, and draw its power more and more directly. We don't want the only pruning knife to be wielded by the pain and sorrow the world will surely inflict in its turn. We want to prune ourselves, guided by the Holy Spirit, so that the energies of the world to come will not be delayed, and the happiness beyond understanding flow into us and through us immediately.

So no lies, no flattery or pretence. We see in the Gospel today how the devil goes for our specific weaknesses. So he did with Christ our Lord; though we may recognize our own frailties in Christ's human temptations. The first insinuation of the devil in the wilderness was that the Son of God should gratify his present needs: simply because he could. Painfully hungry? Then here are stones you can turn into food. The world around

you, says the liar (already conscious of what luxuries await those who can wait for the 21st century in the affluent parts of the world), is full of good things if you put out your hand: such delicacies, such leisure, such instantly enjoyable things, living as you do in circumstances so favourable to self indulgence. Money turns the stony world into a cupboard of pleasures: the only burden is to choose, and put them in order. And I have an App, says Old Nick, that can help you to do that. Only sorry there are so many Adverts on it. Enjoy. You will find it takes all your time up; you need never be bored again. No, said Jesus.

Then the devil suggested to the Son of God that he should go for the grand gesture: what our tradition calls vainglory. Stand on the temple top, he says, and take off into the air. "Here you can be an instant success. You won't regret the really impressive demonstration of who you are, the panache that shows you are somebody who can make a difference, can pull off the unexpected stroke of initiative that will impress Lord Sugar, and make clear to the world that you are wonderful. There is of course a risk; you may land with a thump. But Hey, nothing ventured. Impress us, in a world which is for leaders, for winners." Unveil your inner Superhero. And so says the spokesman for a world which hates humility, judges failures, and endlessly grades people, especially those who you agree (and yes, you do agree, don't you?) are somehow not quite your (ahem) class. So he spoke to the Holy One who was, in the eyes of the world, the very model of a loser, who would instinctively identify with the victim and outsider, and who so lamentably failed to get a really good position in Jerusalem when he could have done so well. But the Saviour knew that triumphs of ambition and pride are heartless parades in front of those who feel defeated, out of the game before they even knew they were playing, who are angry and resentful from their youth up, loathe themselves because they never got as high in the world as the temple roof and blame themselves for not succeeding. So no, said Jesus.

Then the devil said to the Son of God and says to us: "You are the inheritor of the world! But the world is most safely and happily yours if only you will **stop moralising**. Religion is bad for you, an infantile imprisonment in fear. All the kingdoms of the earth are yours if you will only fall down and worship me. Everyone knows the really big money is from ruthlessness. The sugar trade! Drink! Tobacco! Armaments! Betting! These are the safe and steady investments. Where there's muck there's brass. And as for stones being made into caviar and champagne, let me draw your attention to gold and diamonds. Too bad about the Congo, and those tailings dams at the Brazilian gold mines of course, but too much compassion saps the energy required to capture the kingdoms of the world.

The Saviour of the world, who knows what is in our hearts, faced the devil down. Enjoyment, self respect and ambition are not intrinsically bad. But we say, as Christ has taught us, that if they do not fulfil God's will for us, each is a snare for us. Instant gratification impedes fatally our ability to hear and see what it is that God requires of us. The lust for power and success destroys our truly divine capacity for generosity and compassion. Kicking over the impediments of our conscience may give us the yacht and the tax haven, but makes our lives futile, makes us nobodies in the Kingdom of heaven.

Christ brings us not peace with the world, but a sword against the false self the world would make of us. Our faith comes from the desert, and was spread by the obscure heroes of the lonely hermitages of self conquest: from Sinai, from Egypt, from the rocky coves and islands of Cornwall and County Kerry, Iona, Lindisfarne and Iken. We excise their memory at our peril. Perhaps we are beginning to see in our day the shadow side of what we have assumed for so long was sheer progress for the world. We want a truer humanity, a more nourishing holiness.