

**5<sup>th</sup> February 2017**

**Lent 1: Gen 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Rom. 5:12-19; Matt.4:1-11**

*Temptation of Christ*

It is hard to imagine on a beautiful March morning, with sunlight streaming through the stained glass windows into the ancient village church and the comforting liturgy ... it is hard to imagine that you are, in fact, in the midst of a vast wilderness, full of howling winds, prowling beasts and dark voices that whisper cruel things.

It is hard to imagine, but that doesn't mean it is not real.

It's not that the world is not good. Beauty and love and things being right are *real*, and it's right to sing and be joyful and give thanks. Life is *good*, and it is good to be here. The Bible is full of that recognition.

But Lent is a time for realism, and the Bible's realism also knows that goodness is fragile. That beauty and the rightness are often only skin-deep, or fleeting, temporary things.

Right now, within a few miles of this sanctuary of God, terrible abuse will be happening to some child, some vulnerable person.

Right now, we know in our own families the pockets of guilt and suffering and shame.

Right now, most of us know, in our own hearts, the different darkneses that sometimes rise up to engulf us.

Goodness is fragile. Joy is fragile. There's a gone-wrongness that runs through all things, and which lurks by the door, waiting to devour us.

To say so is not pessimism, but simple realism. It's what traditional theology called the doctrine of original sin – which G.K. Chesterton described as the one piece of Christian teaching with any strong empirical evidence behind it.

How did it happen? How – in terms of the Genesis symbolism (and it is of course symbolism: we don't believe in real, factual Gardens of Edens) did we get from God's good garden to threatening wilderness?

The Bible blames two mysterious things. On the one hand, there is some kind of force, energy, person, call it what you will, which simply wants to destroy what God has done – to destroy the good creation, and to destroy us. There's *something, or someone*, that pulls humanity towards our own disintegration and death. It, or he, lures us in all manner of ways, in big decisions and small decisions, but always with the same basic whispers: 'don't love. Don't trust. Don't give. Don't die. Be afraid. Take. Eat. Consume. Grow bigger and stronger. Live forever.' The traditional word for that outside force is the Devil, or Satan. And I believe He is utterly, one hundred per cent, real. Of course there is no great red scaly beast with pitchfork and horns and smoke – that's just a picture. No-one, I hope, believes in the picture. But the reality behind it is *entirely* real.

Outside force on the one hand, on the other: human responsibility. There's something in human nature which responds very readily to the Devil's voice, which doesn't take much tempting. God made us to live a simple life, one of friendship with Him and our neighbours and the creatures around us, but He did not compel us to live it. It was up to us to *want* it, and to *choose* it in all sorts of practical ways. And Adam and Eve's sin, which the Bible sees played out in all of us, over and over again is to make a different choice. They can have the basic relationship with God, or they can listen to the whisper that says to take, eat, consume, acquire, to grow bigger and stronger and wiser. They listen to the whisper. They take, they eat. They choose this over their basic relationship with God.

And their tragedy is that as the Bible teaches, they hadn't realised that it was only when that basic relationship was right, that their relationship with each other and the whole world be right. They broke their relationship with God, and the relationship with each other and the world followed soon after. All of a sudden, their nakedness becomes a problem and they have to make clothes; and in the next chapter we see Adam blaming Eve, and Eve blaming the serpent. Paradise is lost, and we find ourselves in the wilderness. The Devil's appetite for destruction and our own greed and folly combine, to begin undoing God's good creation. And the Bible teaches that just those same forces are at work in us, and in every human being who has ever lived.

Except for one.

The Gospel is that Jesus of Nazareth came into the midst of the human wilderness. He came and he let the full power of the Devil's voices surge around him and beat against Him. The basic appeal was just the same: break the relationship with God. Take. Eat. Consume. Acquire. Never die, receive all the power and the glory. Just abandon God. The basic appeal was the same, but the response was different. Rock-like, Jesus stands alone and beats the Devil back. He will not break his union with God. This time, humanity comes through. This time, it is uncorrupted. As a hymn we'll sing at the 9.30 puts it, 'A second Adam to the fight, and to the rescue came.'

Which is only good news because of what we are about to do in a few moments. Jesus' victory against the Devil, if it were not shared with us, if it were not somehow *put inside* us, is good news for no-one but Jesus. One isolated example of uncorrupted humanity is splendid, but useless. Our Gospel is more comprehensive than that. Our Gospel is that God in Jesus takes his uncorrupted humanity, and puts it inside ours. And that he does that supremely *here*, at the Eucharist. God turns the Devil's words back on Him. 'Take, eat' is no longer the appeal to our greed and folly ... it is the promise of life. We're not seizing life, grabbing it like we tried in the garden. We're receiving it, as a gift. And so it will come to us. Uncorrupted humanity comes inside us, and like fire burning up dross it begins to heal our corruption from within.

What to do about all this? Well, the first thing is just to receive. Come to the eucharist. Keep coming to the eucharist. Ask Jesus to put himself inside you as you put bread and wine inside you, ask for his uncorrupted humanity to come into you and begin to heal yours from within. Make that moment of reception the centre of your week, of all your imagination and your prayers. Make time to prepare for it properly, and to absorb it afterwards – definitely alone, but perhaps also at our Quiet Hour on Tuesday evening or the regular shared silent prayer we'll soon be beginning on Wednesdays.

And as Christ's healing begins within you, work with it. Ask him to illuminate where your particular bit of gone-wrongness might be, how the universal sickness displays itself, uniquely, in you. Where's the bit of you that has listened to the Devil's voice – the bit of you that is run by greed, or fear, or shame. It will be there. Indeed, *they* will be there, and as you grow in grace, you will become more and more aware of them.

You will know them more and more, and be more and more grieved by them, precisely because they will be more and more unlike you, more and more at odds with the deepest heart of your life, which is Christ-in-you.

You will know them more and more, and just as it was a combination of the Devil's whisper and your response which gave them power, so now it will be Christ-in-you and your effort which ends that power.

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The Gospel is that Jesus of Nazareth came into the midst of the human wilderness. He came and he let the full power of the Devil's voices surge around him and beat against Him. The basic appeal was just the same: break the relationship with God. Take. Eat. Consume. Acquire. Never die, receive all the power and the glory. Just abandon God. The basic appeal was the same, but the response was different. Rock-like, Jesus stands alone and beats the Devil back. He will not break his union with God. This time, humanity comes through. This time, it is uncorrupted. As a hymn we'll sing at the 9.30 puts it, 'A second Adam to the fight, and to the rescue came.'

Which is only good news because of what we are about to do in a few moments. Jesus' victory against the Devil, if it were not shared with us, if it were not somehow *put inside* us, is good news for no-one but Jesus. One isolated example of uncorrupted humanity is splendid, but useless. Our Gospel is more comprehensive than that. Our Gospel is that God in Jesus takes his uncorrupted humanity, and puts it inside ours. And that he does that supremely *here*, at the Eucharist. God turns the Devil's words back on Him. 'Take, eat' is no longer the appeal to our greed and folly ... it is the promise of life. We're not seizing life, grabbing it like we tried in the garden. We're receiving it, as a gift. And so it will come to us. Uncorrupted humanity comes inside us, and like fire burning up dross it begins to heal our corruption from within.

What to do about all this? Well, the first thing is just to receive. Come to the eucharist. Keep coming to the eucharist. Ask Jesus to put himself inside you as you put bread and wine inside you, ask for his uncorrupted humanity to come into you and begin to heal yours from within. Make that moment of reception the centre of your week, of all your imagination and your prayers. Make time to prepare for it properly, and to absorb it afterwards – definitely alone, but perhaps also at our Quiet Hour on Tuesday evening or the regular shared silent prayer we'll soon be beginning on Wednesdays.

And as Christ's healing begins within you, work with it. Ask him to illuminate where your particular bit of gone-wrongness might be, how the universal sickness displays itself, uniquely, in you. Where's the bit of you that has listened to the Devil's voice – the bit of you that is run by greed, or fear, or shame. It will be there. Indeed, *they* will be there, and as you grow in grace, you will become more and more aware of them.

You will know them more and more, and be more and more grieved by them, precisely because they will be more and more unlike you, more and more at odds with the deepest heart of your life, which is Christ-in-you.

You will know them more and more, and just as it was a combination of the Devil's whisper and your response which gave them power, so now it will be Christ-in-you and your effort which ends that power.

They are part of you now, but they will not always be so. Because of Christ's victory, their time is over, and they will be driven out. And that is why we give Him thanks and glory and praise. Amen.

**5<sup>th</sup> February 2017**

**Lent 1: Gen 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Rom. 5:12-19; Matt.4:1-11**

*Temptation of Christ*

It is hard to imagine on a beautiful March morning, with sunlight streaming through the stained glass windows into the ancient village church and the comforting liturgy ... it is hard to imagine that you are, in fact, in the midst of a vast wilderness, full of howling winds, prowling beasts and dark voices that whisper cruel things.

It is hard to imagine, but that doesn't mean it is not real.

It's not that the world is not good. Beauty and love and things being right are *real*, and it's right to sing and be joyful and give thanks. Life is *good*, and it is good to be here. The Bible is full of that recognition.

But Lent is a time for realism, and the Bible's realism also knows that goodness is fragile. That beauty and the rightness are often only skin-deep, or fleeting, temporary things.

Right now, within a few miles of this sanctuary of God, terrible abuse will be happening to some child, some vulnerable person.

Right now, we know in our own families the pockets of guilt and suffering and shame.

Right now, most of us know, in our own hearts, the different darknesses that sometimes rise up to engulf us.

Goodness is fragile. Joy is fragile. There's a gone-wrongness that runs through all things, and which lurks by the door, waiting to devour us.

To say so is not pessimism, but simple realism. It's what traditional theology called the doctrine of original sin – which G.K. Chesterton described as the one piece of Christian teaching with any strong empirical evidence behind it.

How did it happen? How – in terms of the Genesis symbolism (and it is of course symbolism: we don't believe in real, factual Gardens of Edens) did we get from God's good garden to threatening wilderness?

The Bible blames two mysterious things. On the one hand, there is some kind of force, energy, person, call it what you will, which simply wants to destroy what God has done – to destroy the good creation, and to destroy us. There's *something, or someone*, that pulls humanity towards our own disintegration and death. It, or he, lures us in all manner of ways, in big decisions and small decisions, but always with the same basic whispers: 'don't love. Don't trust. Don't give. Don't die. Be afraid. Take. Eat. Consume. Grow bigger and stronger. Live forever.' The traditional word for that outside force is the Devil, or Satan. And I believe He is utterly, one hundred per cent, real. Of course there is no great red scaly beast with pitchfork and horns and smoke – that's just a picture. No-one, I hope, believes in the picture. But the reality behind it is *entirely* real.

Outside force on the one hand, on the other: human responsibility. There's something in human nature which responds very readily to the Devil's voice, which doesn't take much tempting. God made us to live a simple life, one of friendship with Him and our neighbours and the creatures around us, but He did not compel us to live it. It was up to us to *want* it, and to *choose* it in all sorts of practical ways. And Adam and Eve's sin, which the Bible sees played out in all of us, over and over again is to make a different choice. They can have the basic relationship with God, or they can listen to the whisper that says to take, eat, consume, acquire, to grow bigger and stronger and wiser. They listen to the whisper. They take, they eat. They choose this over their basic relationship with God.

And their tragedy is that as the Bible teaches, they hadn't realised that it was only when that basic relationship was right, that their relationship with each other and the whole world be right. They broke their relationship with God, and the relationship with each other and the world followed soon after. All of a sudden, their nakedness becomes a problem and they have to make clothes; and in the next chapter we see Adam blaming Eve, and Eve blaming the serpent. Paradise is lost, and we find ourselves in the wilderness. The Devil's appetite for destruction and our own greed and folly combine, to begin undoing God's good creation. And the Bible teaches that just those same forces are at work in us, and in every human being who has ever lived.

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