

A Sermon preached at St Laurence's Church, Wicken on the first Sunday of Lent 2017

[Genesis 2: 15-17; 3: 1-7;] Ps 32; Romans 5: 12-19; Matthew 4: 1-11

A familiar Gospel reading this morning: the story of Jesus' temptations in wilderness. We always hear one of the Gospel-writer's versions of that story on the first Sunday of Lent, and the fact that the story comes up every year leaves people like me with a conundrum. What is there that's new to say about that story? What can I say that hasn't been said already? What can I say that hasn't been said better already, and said by someone other than me?

Here's a thought for this morning.

I've been thinking about books this last week. Thursday as you may know was World Book Day. Maybe you know children who took part in it. I was sorry that I had to spend the whole of Thursday in Ely - it meant I missed children from St Andrew's School walking down the road in costume. Pupils and staff were invited to dress up as characters from books. I'd've loved to have seen them.

It was with World Book day in mind that I prayed with our readings for this morning. What struck me was that Jesus, when he's in the wilderness, quotes from a book. When the devil comes to Jesus to 'tempt' him, whatever we understand that to mean - whether there's a man with a forked tail and pointy horns or whether there are thoughts that come into Jesus' head - what Jesus uses to rebuff those temptations are quotes from a book. And not just any book - Jesus quotes from the Good Book. Jesus, when he's tempted, turns to the Bible. He quotes from what's known as the Pentateuch - the first 5 books of what we call the Old Testament. Each of his quotes comes from Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Pentateuch. Jesus knows his Bible so well that phrases from it are etched on his heart. Phrases from Scripture are part of Jesus' being. The Bible sustains him in his time of trial.

Thinking about that reminded me of what former British hostages said about their time in captivity. Maybe you remember the accounts of Terry Waite, John Macarthy and Brian Keenan when they wrote about when they were held hostage in Beirut. Each of them talks about how they longed for books. They talk about how their guards, some of whom were kind, would go to the market and find books for them - they brought back an amazing mixture of books and magazine - anything written in English - and the hostages would fall upon those books when they were delivered to their cells. They were desperate to have books to read.

I remember hearing Terry Waite on Desert Island Discs. He said then that when he was held captive and had no books, what he relied on was his memory of the psalms he'd learnt as a choir boy - the psalms he still sang as an adult in Canterbury Cathedral. He's learnt them in the Prayer Book translation, and he said how sustaining that translation was for him. I remember him saying that if you're in captivity, the language of the Prayer Book is far richer than the language of more modern translations (though modern translations have their place too, of course). He said that if you're reading the story of the Prodigal Son, Luke's description of how hungry the younger son felt sounds much better in the old version than in the new. The old version, he said, is 'He fain would fill his belly with the pods that the swine were eating', and the new says something like 'He'd've had his dinner with the pigs'. There's something about language that feeds us - something that feeds us especially when times are hard.

Many of you, I imagine, are of a generation where you learnt passages of Scripture by heart. Maybe you learnt them at school, or at Sunday School. My guess is you can still remember them. Young people these days don't do that, generally-speaking. Maybe it'd be good if they did. I don't know.

The writers of Scripture assume we know our Scriptures. They assume we know them like Jesus did. They assume that when we read the Bible we'll notice when something we read refers back to something else. The Bible is full of echoes - full of resonances - that link up passage to passage. That's what's going in today's first reading - 'As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive'. Paul refers back to Adam and Eve. He assumes we know the story. If we know the story, we'll see the pattern - we'll see the mirroring: Adam's sin brings death; Christ - the new Adam - brings life. There's a patterning, a balancing, of death and redemption. There's a structure within the text. If we know our Bibles, we'll see it.

The other thing the writers of Scripture assume, I think, is that we know Scripture well enough not to misuse it. It's interesting, isn't it, that the second time Jesus is tempted, the devil uses Scripture to tempt him? The devil plays Jesus at his own games. He's worked out that Jesus uses Scripture as a weapon, so he quotes from Psalm 91 - 'Throw yourself down from the temple... For Scripture says "He will give his angels charge of you, lest you dash your foot against a stone"'. The devil takes a line from Scripture and uses it out of context. We only have to turn on the news or look at the state of the Church to see how dangerous doing that can be. Phrases from Scripture sit within a framework. The better we know the framework - the better we understand the context - the better our chances of understanding what the Bible is trying to say.

I hope that when you came in today you'll've found the purple leaflets about what's on offer in our churches this Lent. They're sitting on the shelf on the way to the door. There are plenty of groups to join in with. Groups, I know, aren't everybody's thing, so if you do nothing else this Lent, could I encourage you to read your Bibles? Most of us have Bibles at home, but how often do we pick them up and read them?

Many of us, I suspect, take our Bibles for granted, and yet 500 years ago people were giving their lives so that we could read the Scriptures in our own language - read them in a language we could understand - and so be able to hear them for ourselves. There are Christians in some parts of our world today who would face death if their Bibles were found by the authorities. There are people longing for Bibles they don't have; people who spend their lives translating the Bible into the 'little languages of the world' - languages not many people speak - so that those who do speak them can read the Bible for themselves.

So maybe we could use Lent as an opportunity to go back to our Bibles. Let's get them off the shelves and dust them down. Let's open them up and read them. Look up the passages we once learnt by heart and see what they say to us today. Maybe go back to today's Gospel reading - Matthew 4: 1-11 - and see what it says to you when you read it. A friend of mine who knows a lot about the Bible says a trap we tend to fall into when we read the Bible is thinking we know what it says already. We come across a familiar story like today's and we don't listen to it properly - we think we've known it already. And yet the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews says 'the Word of God is alive and active' - the Bible's not a static thing. It's a living thing. It's always got something new to say to us. We need to approach it with fresh ears and fresh eyes. When we do that, please God, we'll find truths within it to sustain us - truths to sustain us through this season of Lent, and sustain us through whatever lies beyond, whatever the future holds.

I'm going to end with the Prayer Book Collect, not for the first Sunday of Lent but for the second Sunday in Advent. Let us pray:

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.