

Testing Times

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-13

“Rembrandt drew several depictions of the Devil tempting Jesus. In one of them the two look like two friends. They appear to be ambling down a country road, deep in conversation. The Devil is half a step behind Jesus. His head is skeletal, but there is an urgent, deeply human look on his face. He is reasoning with Jesus, not menacing Him. One of his wings is thrown over Jesus’ shoulder in an almost familial manner. He leans in, mouth open slightly, eyes on Christ, speaking quietly, a heave stone in his hands. He holds the stone out as if it were a gift. ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’

“It is a scene of powerful intimacy. Despite his wings, Satan does not look monstrous. He looks reasonable. Most of our temptations are. Rembrandt captures this truth powerfully. It is easy to identify with Jesus in his drawing... Jesus is tempted to sacrifice the truth of Who He is for material gain, prestige, power. We have all faced such temptation.”ⁱ

The temptation, no pun intended, today, is to take the Temptations, or the testing of Jesus, and apply the idea of temptation or testing to our own lives. That’s not a bad idea, but this passage from Luke’s Gospel says more than that. The story is first and foremost a story about God, in Jesus. It reveals something new about God. There are times, and where better than in Church, when we need to lift our eyes away from our fixation on humanity, and look, however uncomfortably, to God.

The testing of Jesus is a story about how God, in Jesus, chooses the harder way to be with humanity. Instead of making things easy, instead of creating a God Who is like some kind of magician, conjuring up bread from a stone, or ruling the world and fixing everything with a wave of the divine hand, or arm-wrestling God into submission to our will when we do something reckless and expect God to sort out the mess we’ve made for ourselves.

Instead of being the ‘magician’ God, instead of being the omnipotent fixer of everything wrong in the world God, God, in Jesus, chooses a harder path that took Him to the cross. Rather than a

God responsible for everything, we see a God who resists the temptation, and gets alongside us to help us work the hard things out in life together. And God also remains strong enough in those times when trying to work out the hard things of life we still cannot make sense of what is going on, simply to be silent, with us, but **with us**.

That is an uncomfortable thing to realise about God. We want a God riding on a white charger, a superhero righting wrongs, sorting out evil doers, banishing pain and suffering, doing something about Donald Trump, fixing Brexit, stopping our world from changing in a way we don't want it to change, or changing the world to conform with what we think it ought to be. We want the kind of God Who was prayed to by people in every nation in every war who assumed that God would be on their side, and grant them victory.

Whereas God is, in reality, on every side, and victory to God looks very different from what we would expect, or want, or think we deserve.

We want God to be all-powerful in each of the areas where Jesus is tested in the Temptation story. We want God to hold ultimate authority in every arena, be it economic (turn stones into bread), political (rule over all kingdoms), or spiritual (the miraculous power of saving people from death). However to each of these tests Jesus says no.

"If Jesus had said yes to any of these temptations from the Devil He might have become an ancient revolutionary, a skilful politician, or a beloved magician. He would have become an unusually powerful person – which is not really that unusual. Every age is replete with powerful people." The people are not necessarily bad or evil, but do you think anyone will remember their names in two thousand years, let alone sing hymns to them in worship?"ⁱⁱ

Had Jesus responded to the Devil differently, Jesus' story would have ended differently. By refusing to practice human power Jesus made Himself vulnerable to human power. What is the point of a God like that? Surely we want, need, demand a God Who can snap fingers and sort everything out for us at once?

I'm not a parent, but I have spent a lot of time watching parents. It's one of the toughest jobs in the world, and few, if any, get it right all of the time. I have watched parents love their children to

pieces, and wrap them up in cotton wool, and protect them from every hurt and harm and bad thing in the world. I've watched them do their children's homework when it was too hard for the child. I've watched them provide for every possible need and eventuality, sometimes sacrificially, providing for their child the things they never had when they grew up. And I've watched others, present, but not over-protective. Supportive, but not overwhelming. I've watched the parents who have been honest with their children, and said no to them, and cope, or fail to cope, with the consequences.

Those are the two extremes of parenthood, and most will oscillate between the two, but I think we might work out which is the more robust, resilient form of parenthood.

I wonder, is that the way it is with God? Not taking away the temptations and dealing with them in some superhuman way, but letting Jesus make the choices, and live with the consequences, and never, ever, walking away from Him?

God stands with God's children, in the testing times, and never walks away. There is no divine cotton-wool to be wrapped around, but there is a steady, imaginative, encouraging presence that enables us, I believe, to encounter God in the testing times, the wilderness times, and know that God is with us to help us and strengthen us.

Jesus gathered strength for the life that awaited Him beyond the wilderness. It is a painful but fruitful time, and Jesus emerges not only with self-knowledge, and into activism that involved healing, teaching, and confronting unjust powers, but also with a knowledge of Who God is. Present, and pointing to a future where work needs done, and lives need transformed, and hope needs to be experienced and shared.

Jesus emerged from the testing time of the wilderness with steadiness to face the world that followed Him, worshipped Him and crucified Him. He emerged because He knew God was there, right by His side, and that He was open to God being there.

How true is that for us; and how true is that for the Church?

I read of a visitor coming to a church one Sunday. It was a small church with only fifteen or so in the congregation so it was easy to spot a visitor. The visitor had a rather fixed notion of what it

meant to be a church, and found the church service very confusing, and the vicar even more so. The visitor stayed afterwards and asked the vicar, “What kind of church *are* you?” Instead of the vicar answering, he asked a member of the congregation, who was a bit of a character. The man was of mixed race, had held a number of jobs and known a good bit of unemployment. He was well-known in the community because he weighed over twenty stone. “Our visitor wants to know what kind of Church we are.” The man paused, thought for a moment, and then said, ‘Open to God.’”ⁱⁱⁱ

In the testing times, whatever they might be in your life, be open to this honest God, and let God be with you to help.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Matt Fitzgerald, Feasting on the Gospels, Luke Vol 1 p93

ⁱⁱ *ibid*, p97

ⁱⁱⁱ Sam Wells, Speaking the Truth, p76