



First Sunday in Lent

13th March 2011

Deuteronomy 8 1-10, Psalm 91, Hebrews 2 10-18, Luke 4: 1-13

May I speak in the name of the one God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Our theme today is trust, but before we get there there's another word that runs through all of the readings and hovers in the air of this first Sunday in Lent. That word is 'testing', along with similar words like 'temptation' and 'trial'. What images does the word test or testing conjure up for you? Sitting in an exam room with a blank sheet in front of you and the terror of realising that your mind has gone blank too? Standing outside the headmaster's office waiting for the axe to fall? Sitting in a doctor's surgery waiting for results that may determine your future life? Or on the wider scene, thinking at this time of the people of Japan going through very severe testing in the light of the earthquake and the tsunami? Or think of Libya right now, where the government and the rebels are each testing each other in *contest* that we don't know the outcome yet. And of course we know that testing like that can be for our good: we sit an exam to gain a qualification that we desire, but that doesn't make it fun. I saw a building with a sign, 'Office of Non-Destructive Testing' – I don't know what they do there, but when I think about it I suppose an X-ray would be an example of non-destructive testing, to find out what's going on inside the human body without having to cut us open to find out. So I can see that in industry and medicine it's good to get information without having to inflict pain or damage if possible. But it isn't all like that, as we know. How do you feel about dentists?

Especially if we find ourselves in the place of fear or pain or anxiety or danger, we need to know whether, in the midst of what feels to us like evil, there is good. Every such experience, big or little, tests our character, it tests our faith and our perception of life. I was rereading lately a book called *An Evil Cradling*, by Brian Keenan who was one of those who in the late eighties was kidnapped by Islamic militia and he, along with others like Terry Waite and John McCarthy, was held for four and a half years in a prison somewhere near Beirut. And he writes movingly about this testing time and what got him through. Imagine, for example, being held for weeks in solitary confinement in a tiny cell, with no idea where you are and then having to listen while a man in the room below is tortured for hours and finally shot. How would you react to that situation? It might well make you curl up, do everything you can to cling to please your captors keep the evil at bay.

But Brian Keenan found he couldn't do that. To preserve his own sense of self, his identity as a human being, he felt he had to resist. He refused to let his captors think that they had him beaten or that they had a right to do to him what they were doing. So he demanded to know why he was being kept there and he went on hunger strike

for weeks until they told him. All this is a high risk policy and it had its cost, though it paid off in the end. And then he found something else too, as in this passage, where he and his companion have just been carried for some hours in the boot of a car blindfolded and gagged and tied, and they've been dumped in a new cell, and they're wondering what is going on:

'Again we heard feet approaching the cell, a key turned and the door opened. A voice spoke: "You want anything?" Our minds raced. There were so many things we wanted. Most of all we wanted to know where we were and when this absurdity was going to end. But these were answers we knew we would never be given. After some moments I stood up and said, "Yes. I want a colour TV set, a bicycle and a grand piano." Silence. The guard spoke again: "Speak slowly. What you want?" Again I said slowly, very meticulously and menacingly, "I want a colour TV, a bicycle and a grand piano." The guard muttered something to the man who stood with him, I could hear him laughing briefly; the other stood in silence then walked off, then the door closed.' Even in these grim circumstances he found humour and the power of humour liberating and life-giving.

So now we see Jesus coming into the desert, coming voluntarily, though led by the Spirit, (St Mark says 'driven by the Spirit'), coming into a place of physical hardship and danger and isolation and loneliness - his own place of testing. And he comes to answer a question of identity: who am I? He's just, at his baptism, heard a divine voice say, 'You are my son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased'. In these temptations he's being asked, (surely he's asking himself), what does that mean? If you are the Son of God, what then? Turn stones into bread? Establish a kingdom on earth? Show he can fly? Can he, being Son of God, do these things and if he can, should he? Faced with these attractive, exciting, devilishly plausible scenarios for how the Son of God should live, there's an element, I think, of humour and surprise in his answers, which arrive of course not from his own head, but they come out of scripture, out of some deep place: 'It is written', he says. But he isn't 'proof texting' – he isn't opening the book at random or dropping a pin on the text to see what it says, he's searching the scriptures in their depths for guidance for what it means to be called by God. And the answers he finds all come from the same place, from the Book of Deuteronomy, including chapter 8 that we heard just now.

That book, Deuteronomy, is a powerful and central text in the Old Testament, which dramatises the situation of Israel at a moment of decision, standing across the River Jordan, on the edge of the Promised Land. The whole book is comprised of a speech by Moses challenging the people to draw from their past a faith which will give them strength for their future. Israel has come out of forty years of wandering in the desert, a long and difficult time when they constantly were asking, 'What are we doing here? What is the use of being free in a desert? Wouldn't we be better off being back as slaves back in Egypt?' And even if some of their suffering was their own fault, it was hard for the people to keep their faith in Moses and his God, and the texts look back especially to one particular incident called *Massah*, the testing of God, when the people demanded that Moses give them proof: 'Is God among us or not?' That's their past.

In chapter 8 of Deuteronomy in the passage we heard, Moses is telling them the story of their hardships but in a different way, not as a story of rebellion but a story of learning. He says - and you can follow the verbs through the passage - he says, God *led* you, God *humbled* you, God *tested* you, God *disciplined* you as a parent disciplines a child, and all this finally to *bring* you into a good land. It's been, he says, a time of testing – though non-destructive testing, for he says, 'The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years', though that can't diminish the struggle and the pain. And the question now is, have they learnt through being lost and being led by God, being hungry and being fed by God, have they learned to see that there's a nurturing discipline designed to set them free, to show them that real life is lived not by bread alone but by growing in relationship with God and receiving what God gives as life-giving, however pleasant or unpleasant it may seem at any point.

So that's the message of Deuteronomy here and now we find Jesus also in the desert reflecting on what Moses said to his ancestors in the desert fifteen hundred years before, words that though old were for him still current because they were words of God: 'it is written'. And he finds in them words of life and pointers to his identity, because if Israel was God's people called to live by God ways, (though mostly they failed in that), he now knew he was the one called to take up that task and fulfil it: to be God's son. And that meant living not by bread but by God's word, not turning away from dependence on God to pursue success and worldly glory, not putting God to the test as Israel did at Massah.

Of course in real sense Jesus' whole life was engaged in this struggle with evil; these temptations in the desert are really a preliminary skirmish; the real struggle comes at the end with Gethsemane and Calvary. The letter to the Hebrews assures us it was necessary for Jesus, like us, to go through this testing and to be made perfect through suffering. But we naturally ask, is it necessary? Why? If God desires to give us good and wonderful gifts as God surely does, why can that not happen without all this struggle? Is this testing for Jesus and for us really necessary?

Another way to put this would be to ask, when Jesus faced the devil's questions, did he give the right answers? In our discussion group this week we were reminded of a story that is told in the Dostoyevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, and that story in the novel imagines that Christ came to earth again in sixteenth century Spain and was condemned by the Church's representative, Grand Inquisitor, for failing the test. The Inquisitor says to Christ in this story, being Son of God he could have turned the stones into bread, and he should have. Why should people struggle to feed themselves day by day when God could feed us all at every moment? And he could show it. And why should we struggle with disorders and wars, when God could establish a kingdom of peace right now. By doing these things, he says, Jesus could have used his divine power for good and given us certainty that God is real, instead of which Jesus left us struggling in our humanity, not only to defeat evil ourselves to make a better

world, but to find in our hearts faith in God to live by. That's why the Inquisitor in this story condemns Christ.

You may recognise that his condemnation is another variation of ancient Israel's rebellion against God in the desert at Massah, when they said, is God with us or not? Where's the proof? And that's a testing of God, which the whole of western culture has been pressing for the last three centuries, I'd say. Everything we call enlightenment, modernity, post-modernity, amounts to a long questioning of God, a demand that if God can't give us the good things we want, and show us for a fact that God's there, then we won't believe in him and we'll believe in ourselves instead. Because of that demand for the comfort of certainty, our world is becoming, even as we look now, polarised between atheists and fundamentalists.

But Jesus rejected the devil's options and by his example he rejects both those bogus forms of certainty. What he points us to is the middle way, the way of trust, in which we need to grow into the fullness of human being, through self-knowledge and openness to one another, and the love of God. If learning to walk this way of trust that we do once again in Lent, perhaps it's good to know we can do this together and that Jesus has been this way before us. For us, as for him, life is lived not by instant certainty but by faith, and it's in the darkness of the Cross with its testing, that the light of Resurrection dawns.

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