

THE WILDERNESS

Matthew 4:1-11

I have been dealing with letters and emails about Edward Colston all week. The conversation about Colston is a conversation about how you define him. Do you see him and just see slavery or do you see something else? There are plenty of people who for good reason think that the evil of slavery is completely defining. They see that and cannot see past it. There are other kinds of monstrous evil that shake us to the core, paedophilia, genocide, the use of torture... We are serious about evil. We are less fussed by sin, or temptation. They do not worry as they once did. One of the books I looked at this week suggested that sin used to be a Rottweiler, but now it is a poodle. *Sin*, I discover, is a premium denim label. I am not really a denim sort of Dean, so I will not be clothed in sin any time soon. Even so, I still have options, *Greed* and *Lust* are clothing labels too. On the internet you can easily find the *Seven Deadly Sins the Quiz, What's your sin?* Sin and temptation are a kind of joke. *Temptation*, I am told, is the name of a lap dancing club in Bristol, and *Temptations* are very popular cat treats - there is a *flavor for every feline*.

On the First Sunday of Lent and I have to see if we can do a bit better. To help us we have a gospel reading about the Temptation in the Wilderness, Matthew Chapter Four.

Now Matthew is the gospel that begins with that long genealogy,

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar Matthew 1:2-3

It is a history of Israel. From the very beginning, he tells the long story. In the next two chapters he uses another device,

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken ... through the prophet: Matt 1:22

They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: Matt 2:5

Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: Matt 2:17

Lots of that, the back story again. Things happen because they were foretold.

Then it begins to get really clever. Only Matthew tells us that, when they flee Herod, Jesus' parents take him into Egypt. *Egypt*, we are supposed to sit up and take notice, that is where the children of Israel went, they had to be rescued by Moses. In Exodus, the Israelites went through the waters of the Reed Sea, were named the children of God and enter the wilderness. Jesus does the same. He goes through the water of baptism, he is named God's Son and goes into the wilderness. We have been here before.

So we know when he hear this morning's story that we have been here before. In the wilderness Jesus is tempted, it has happened before. The same story, told again. It is deliberate.

The First Temptation

The tempter comes to Jesus and says,

"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

Jesus is hungry, he has been fasting for forty days and forty nights. This is a real temptation. In the wilderness Israel had been hungry too. They 'murmured' against Moses and remembered

...the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate bread to the full Ex. 16:2,3

The Lord sent manna, you will remember, and when they complained that it was dull, he sent quails. But, the Lord was angered by their complaining and the Lord has a slightly alarming sense of humour. He sent so many quails - a pile two cubits high, that they rotted and caused a plague. So they called that place *Kib'roth-hatta'avah*, the graves of appetite.

And, when Jesus was tempted to satisfy his hunger, he quoted a line of Deuteronomy at Satan:

"It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'" Deut. 8:3

Why did he say that? Because that is what Moses said when he reminded Israel of its dreadful greed in the wilderness. It is Deuteronomy 8; Jesus was quoting Moses. He was telling the story again.

The Second Temptation

Then the devil took Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will give his angels charge of you...'"

It seems a strange temptation, but, again, we have been here before. When the Israelites were getting weary of their long years in the wilderness they came to a place called the Plains of Rephidim where they despaired and declared that they would die. It was on the Plains of Rephidim that Moses struck the rock and brought forth water proof of the presence of the living God.

But he called the name of the place Massah and Mer'ibah, because of the fault-finding of the children of Israel" Exodus 17:7

Massah, the place of bitterness, and *Meribah*, the place of testing.

On the pinnacle of the temple Satan invited Jesus to despair, to throw himself down and put God to the test. The devil, who is a very tricky character and even knows scripture, quoted Psalm 91 (verse 11) *for it is written, 'He will give his angels charge of you...'* Jesus remembered Massah where Israel despaired and tested God. Again he quoted Deuteronomy and a saying that was coined for Massah

it is written, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.' Deut. 6:16

The Third Temptation

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

Now this trip up a high mountain is a slightly complicated bit of memory. In Deuteronomy 34 Moses was sent up Pisgah, Mount Nebo of Sinai.

Go up to the top of Pisgah and look around you to the west, to the north, to the south, and to the east
Deuteronomy 3:27

So Moses looked at all the nations of the world once. But, more famously, Moses also went up Mount Sinai to receive the Law. Down below, the people began to grumble again. They wanted a God who was not so

alarming and not such hard work. So they made a God, a God who was not up a mountain. They made a golden calf. Moses was unimpressed and his sense of humour was every bit as alarming as God's. He made the people break up the calf and grind it into powder. He made everyone who had worshipped the calf drink the powder. And they drank the powder and they died.

Satan, cleverly, offered Jesus only what was his by right. What the devil said was a parody of Psalm 2:

You are my son.... I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession
Psalm 2:7-8

Jesus will have none of it and he quotes Deuteronomy yet again

Begone, Satan! for it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve'.

Our Temptations

Jesus goes into the wilderness and faces again the temptations that Israel faced. He tells the story again and he tells it better. He tells it without giving in to temptation. Israel failed, Christ did not. But this is not just a story about him. It is a long story, remember.

The first temptation is to turn stone into bread. It is the temptation to get what you want and get it now. We are surrounded by good things. Everything God gives us remember is good. So if you are tempted by new shoes, or chocolate truffles that is no surprise. Those are good things. Our problem comes when we think we have to have new shoes or chocolate truffles *now*. Desire - and it could be a desire for gossip, or anger, or to be important –can get hold of us, take us over. Desire can define us. When that happens we have come to *Kib'roth-hatta'avah*, the graves of appetite.

The second temptation is the temptation to despair. There is more of it about than you might think. Despair begins wherever someone is cynical and sarcastic. "There's nothing you can do about it; It's just the way things are, don't bother it won't make a difference" – we have dozens of ways of dressing despair up and making it sound sensible and wise. Despair takes you to the plains of Rephidim, where you want to die. It is *Massah* and *Meribah*, bitterness and testing

Finally, there is the terrible temptation to idolatry. That might seem far-fetched. No one here sneaks out to the garden shed to bow before a golden statue of the Canon Precentor or their cat. Do not be taken in. Idolatry is there the moment you begin to live for something other than God. If you make anything, other than God, the reason for living then you are an idolater. If you over-work, well that is probably idolatry. If you live for your children, that is idolatry. If you only feel alive in the betting shop that is idolatry. It takes many forms and there is a lot of it about.

It is an old story. It is always the same story. That is the point Matthew makes and we do not re-write it now. Evil is not out there, slavery and paedophiles, a problem for other people differently wired from us. Sin is alive and doing very well indeed in Westbury on Trim and indeed in the Deanery. It is appetite and desire and that is why Lent is all about appetite and desire. Know the temptation. Know that I am a sinner, know that you are a sinner too. This road leads through the wilderness to the cross. You will turn aside if you give in to appetite and desire, if you despair or if you live for anything other than God.

Note: I first heard some of these ideas in a sermon preached by Jeffrey John, in Magdalene College, Cambridge, many years ago.