



1st Sunday in Lent

(Preaching on Matthew 4: 1-11 – the temptations of Jesus)

Here. In the temptations, Jesus is tempted as we know - three times.

In his desperate hunger he is tempted by Satan to eat by using his Godly power to turn the very stones at his feet into bread.

In the isolation of the desert, he is tempted to see if God still loves him – to see if God will be there for him – by throwing himself down from the highest point of the temple.

IN his complete lack of power at that moment he is tempted to have all power – Satan promises him all the world (not that it's his to promise) if Jesus will just worship him.

In each of the attacks by Satan Jesus quotes scripture. It is written, he says. It is written man shall not live by bread alone; it is written do not tempt the Lord your God; it is written worship the Lord your God only. Jesus knew the Jewish scriptures, and often quoted it revealing how he, God, was the fulfilment of what was written. The final Word – made flesh.

But the devil of course, as we know, can also quote Scripture.

There are three passages I know of where Satan speaks directly – in the first person. There may be others.

He speaks to Eve, doesn't he, about God. Eve, remember, God said they would die if they ate from the fruit of the tree but Satan says, nah, you won't die. God is just worried you'll become like him. So, he speaks to humanity.

Secondly, he speaks to God himself at the start of the book of Job. He argues with God that Job only loves him because of the many blessing he has received – take it all and he will fall. Satan says.

Thirdly, here in the temptations narrative, the devil speaks directly to Jesus.

In both Matthew and Luke – this narrative is only briefly in Mark and not at all in John – the devil too quotes scripture. When he says, in the second temptation, If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:

“He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’^[c]”

He is quoting psalm 91, almost directly.

The devil quotes scripture to the Word of God made flesh. Live in the irony for a moment.

No wonder he loses. Jesus doesn't say, you're right Lucifer, it does say that. That's the chapter, that's the verse. I'd better do it. He says, no, there something more going on here – even scripture has nuance and context and priorities. And the priority is obedience to God.

The devil quoted scripture to the word made flesh.

Someone once said scripture was given to us not for our information but for our transformation. It is not a cookery book from which you can take a recipe; or an old-fashioned car manual from which you can work out how to remove a battery. It is not a mine of information for us to use to quote and prove a point. It is for transformation, not information.

It is to make us different; to make us Christ-like, more like the Word made Flesh.

Augustine once wrote that our Holy Scriptures are 'like a letter from home'. I like that. Not only is it a beautiful way of putting it – it speaks to the relationship. The Bible is a love letter from home, and is thereby precious, but it is not home.

Gandhi said:

'You Christians look after a document – the Bible - containing enough dynamite to blow all civilisations to pieces, turn the world upside down and bring peace to a battle torn planet. But you treat it as though it were nothing more than a piece of literature'.

How? Why?

I would suggest because Christians have tried and in part succeeded in making the Bible God, the thing itself, rather than a love letter giving us longed for glimpses of home and our Father.

The Bible is not God. Even the devil, in this reading, can quote the Bible, but he would not dare quote Jesus. He leaves defeated. Most people, including me, either intentionally or unintentionally take Scripture out of context in order to persuade others to read it as we do. Jesus used scripture to stay close to God, the devil used it to win an argument.

Let me give you a couple of examples of the importance of context.

'Do not worry'.

Jesus said that. So, we quote him. And sometimes we frown at ourselves and others for worrying – don't worry about this and about that. Have faith. And it's good advice sometimes. Other times, all it does is make us feel lacking in faith. Wrong to worry, though worry is human and therefore fairly normal.

When Jesus, the Word made Flesh, spoke about not worrying he was speaking into a very particular context. Men and women were living in desperation, under the thumb of the brutal Roman empire, under the thumb of inflexible religious rule, not sure if they would be paid at the end of that day. They lived from one day to the next and their worries were for survival. And he spoke with compassion. He wasn't making anyone feel guilty – He was saying, do not worry. It will be ok. God has this. So often we miss the tone of Jesus' teaching. Or we make him speak with anger or judgment, when the Word made Flesh actually is speaking with tenderness and affection to an oppressed humanity.

Think about General Synod recently – the decision to enable gay people to receive a blessing following their civil marriage. But not marriage. And grudgingly given by many. One of the arguments against gay marriage is that, even though we might sympathise, we cannot change doctrine. Quote the marriage service – quote the Bible. It is so easy.

Firstly, of course doctrine and so liturgy changes – of course it does – fifty years ago, when our parents or grandparents were getting married the woman had no choice but to promise to obey. And under no circumstances could a divorcee hope to remarry in church. Of course, doctrine changes.

We now permit divorce and the remarriage of divorcees. So, liturgy and dogma can change, and it does. And it changes, I believe, as we understand the Word of God better – the Word doesn't change but we do. And we need to.

But when we don't want it to – when we want the doctrine to stay as it ever as - we say, ah but the Bible says (information not transformation) Literature, not dynamite.

I'm a Bible believing Christian too – so let's see what the Bible appears to say. Genesis - God creates Adam and Eve for companionship, saying it is not good for man to live alone, and tells them to go forth and multiply. It is not good for man to live alone, 'I will make him a helper and so a man leaves his father and mother becomes one flesh with his wife'.

So far, so good. Though actually often it is the woman who leaves her father and mother. But Genesis, as Jonathan Tallon has said and I quote him with great respect for being able to articulate so simply what is so true 'Genesis is the story of creation not the creation of commands'. It is a beautiful story illustrating the purpose of marriage, it is not a list of rules. If it defined marriage for all time, we'd have to remember the primary purpose of marriage is to go forth and multiply. I have married couples who were not going to have children for all manner of reasons.

No, as Tallon says, genesis is descriptive, not prescriptive. Or, as I would put it, it's a beautiful poem, through which we grasp just glimpses, just glimpses of God's great purpose for us and our place in his creation. Genesis is poetry, not law.

Read the Bible with discernment, with humility, with compassion. As though it were what it is – a glimpse of an unchanging God whom we are all, in our ways and in our stories, trying to grow ever more closely to. Read it with Love. Unlike the devil who clearly read it with an agenda.

Love is Love and God is Love. And God is eternal and unchanging, but we are not. We need to grow, and we will not grow while we think Scripture is a monologue. It is a dialogue a love letter from home. There are so many more love letters in scripture, so much more God wants to say, but we have trapped him in a box and called it 'finished'.

We are not God. God is much more than us. God is bigger than Scripture. I'm sorry, but God is. In scripture we get a glimpse of God's beauty and truth and grace and of everything he wants for us – we glimpse it in the stories of the Old Testament, and God's frustration with people who also think they have faith sorted. Mostly we see glimpses of God in the person of Jesus. Listen to him. God does not change; his purpose for us does not change, but we do, and we must. But that won't happen if we think the God who made heaven and earth, who calmed the storms and fed the five thousand, can be trapped in the dogma we have mined from his Love letters.

The bible is not for our information – it is for our transformation.

Don't memorise it – live it. And let's live it as though we followed in the end, not the just the word but the word made flesh. Love made flesh.

A final story...

There was an atheist; and he decided one day to give Christianity a shot. And his way of giving Christianity a shot was to read the Bible through, from start to finish, Genesis to revelation. One day, on a high-speed train into work, he was reading the Bible, - halfway through Deuteronomy he just sighed, aid I cannot be doing with this and threw his bible out of the train window.

A few years later, still an atheist, he is walking along Oxford Street in London and happens upon a street preacher. He pauses and listens to her preaching and then afterwards, speaks to her. I have been searching all my life for faith such as you are shoeing; the passion, the energy, the hope you have – how did you come by it.

The preacher smiled. Well, I too was once an atheist; I had suffered, struggled, and grown weary with the lack pf purpose and hope in my life. At my lowest point I just sat down on a railway embankment and cried out God if you're there, show yourself.

AT THAT very moment a bible flew through the air smacked me on the back of the head.

God is speaking through Scripture – but be ready – God might not be using it in a way you expect or can control.