

First Sunday in Lent 2019 (10.03.19)

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

Boynton, Carnaby & Wold Newton

I wonder what picture springs to mind in most of us when we hear the word Devil. There's a sort of cartoon figure which immediately springs to my mind and I suspect it might spring into other people's as well. I imagine a red figure with pointy ears and horns carrying a pitchfork. And I don't think my mind can be too warped because if you do a Google images search that's precisely the image that floods your computer screen.

So when we hear the Gospel proclaimed this morning I guess most of us imagine a sort of cartoon encounter between this rather comical figure and a knock-kneed Jesus desperately trying not to cave into temptation the way we do every time we eat a cream cake we know we shouldn't. But that doesn't do justice to Luke's account. The point is that temptations are not a sign

of weakness: they're a sign of strength. We're tempted to do things we are able to do. And the things we're tempted to do are not silly things that are naughty but nice but good things that add up and make perfect sense.

In early representation Satan he is often portrayed as attractive and pure and beautiful. And well he might be. The things the story tells us he invites Jesus to do are very attractive. Just think about it. If someone told you that all the people living in deprivation either in Brid or the surrounding villages could go down to north beach, pick up a stone and all their material needs would vanish – no kids going to school without breakfast, no-one paying extortionate interest on payday loans, no girls skipping off school because they can't afford a tampon – wouldn't you want that? If, 18 days before scheduled Brexit, a genie popped out a bottle and said that from tomorrow morning the government could be led by Theresa May, Jeremy Corbyn or Jesus Christ is there anybody, whether true

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blue Tory or fully paid up Corbynista, who would opt for either of the former? And wouldn't be wonderful if faith were easy, if there were no doubts and everybody could clearly see (rather than "looking in a glass dimly" as we do now) exactly who and what God is?

The things the story has Jesus tempted to do are thoroughly worthy things. And we, too, are often tempted to do thoroughly worthy things. We might also get tempted into debauchery or dishonesty, but they're not morally difficult. We might do the right thing or the wrong thing, but we'll know easily enough which it is. The tricky stuff, the stuff that takes spiritual incite and the discipline to cultivate that incite, is the stuff that appears worthy.

St Augustine characterised what made each of these temptations sinful by describing each of them with one, albeit different word: appetite, ambition and boasting. There's nothing wrong with feeding the hungry, with having good political leadership or

having a clear vision of God. But the problem is being motivated by appetite, ambition or boasting. And these are the things that are absolutely inherent in the human condition: gluttony, vainglory and avarice for prominence and power.

On the face of the story, Jesus manages to overcome the devil by trumping him at citing proof texts from the Bible. I think we need to be a bit careful with this. Because actually the way we often abuse the Bible is to snatch of proof text from here or there and try to bash somebody over the head with it. The Bible is too complex, it's too important to be used in such a simplistic way. And what Jesus really defeats the devil with is not a better set of quotes, but the authoritative word of God.

If we are to keep a holy Lent, its hallmark will be that it has been a period of spiritual discipline. That means immersing ourselves in the Word of God. That will alter our perspective; make us less dependent on the

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achievements of our own appetite, ambition and boasting; and create in us a greater awareness of God's mercy and our dependence on it. And that will enable us to celebrate a joyful Easter.

The prototype of this is seen in our Old Testament lesson. So often the story of the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt can be seen as a prototype of the liberation Jesus achieves for everybody. And we're told that when the Israelites were to offer their first fruits it was so that they could celebrate God's bounty. And that was accompanied by them reciting all God's mercies to them. They had to recall how they had been wandering Arameans, went down to Egypt, got enslaved, cried out and were liberated. And they were liberated by God dragging them through the wilderness for 40 units of time – 40 years in their case.

Lent is 40 days. It's our time to spend time recalling God's mercies, to be led through the wilderness of

appetite, ambition and boastfulness and then to be able to celebrate all that God gives us through the resurrected Christ.

Amen.