

First Sunday in Lent Year B

Genesis 9.8-15, I Peter 3.18-22, Mark 1.12-15

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The lectionary this morning offers some particularly pertinent scripture. The phrase, to go to hell and back, is not straightforwardly Biblical, but our second reading, from the First Letter of Peter, describes Christ as “being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit; in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison”. Those last few words are the traditional scriptural proof text for the idea of the harrowing of hell, or the doctrine of the descent of Christ into Hades. This is the idea, excessively popular in medieval Christianity, that at the point of his death, Christ descended into the underworld to smash the gates of hell and release from prison the captive patriarchs, Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses etc, who had been languishing under the control of the prince of darkness and waiting for the coming of the Messiah.

In context, that extract from I Peter is probably intended to convey something slightly different: the idea is that, in the earliest times, there were rebellious spirits who would not accept the ways of God, and that the risen Christ proclaims his triumph to them, in a type of victory procession. But the rather racier medieval reading with its journey into hell and its return from darkness to light, could easily be adopted by anyone wanting to analogise the dark times in which the world currently finds itself, and the hopeful prospect of an escape route through the vaccination programme. Such hope we might even portray with the rainbow of Genesis 9, the sign of God's covenant with the world he has created, never again to bring it to destruction.

However, it's not the Old Testament or the Epistle but the Gospel which, to me, speaks directly to our locked down lives, and it does so because of what it doesn't say as much as what it does. We are well used to

hearing, at the beginning of Lent, of Christ's temptation in the wilderness. We know the story very well – if you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread, and so on. But this year, we have not heard it. Mark's account of Jesus' time in the wilderness is exceptionally brief. Two verses only: "the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him." Whilst we are told that Jesus is in the wilderness for forty days, and that he is tempted, or tested, by Satan, nothing further is offered. And so the preacher is rather stuck, because the expected sermon on the nature of temptation doesn't seem to be justified by the gospel reading.

This year, that might be a good thing. Instead, we can consider the absence of temptation. We are all bound to have heard someone – an Archbishop, even – say that Lent has not only just begun but has been going on for a year, it seems. Perhaps we have told others

that this year we are giving up going to the pub, or socializing with others, or any of the other possibilities which are already excluded by our lockdown regulations. There just does not seem to be the same sort of opportunity to be tempted, and hence to resist temptation, as in normal years. At the same time, plenty of people, myself included, are urging that we should use our common sense and go easy on ourselves this Lent. A simple and positive Lenten discipline seems much more appropriate in our current circumstances than does a bold attempt to forego something whose absence we will find very difficult indeed. I have not given up alcohol this year. Perhaps I should and I am simply weak. Or perhaps I am right in my suspicion that it is not the will of God for me to abstain from one of the few remaining relaxations in very trying times.

The absence of temptation is much more important than our own individual choices about particular things, however. This is so because our own notion of temptation, indeed of Lenten discipline, is generally

misguided. We see temptation as something almost exciting – we associate it with the cream cake, the large scotch, the saucy movie. But if all we had for our Lenten gospel was this short summary from St Mark, we probably wouldn't use the word tempting at all. The Greek verb *peirazo* is just as well rendered by “testing” as it is by “tempting”. In English, the difference between those two has become marked, but if anything the gospel meaning is closer to testing. Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan. This is, for Jesus, a time to fast and to pray and to discern the will of the Father. It is not primarily about showing himself to be some sort of perfect ascetic.

We do well to remember, also, that the wilderness is not the place where Satan dwells. It's easy to read the story as if Jesus goes into the wilderness it is the realm of evil and testing. Not so. Everywhere is the realm of evil and testing, as far as Jesus is concerned. He has come to bind the strong man, to despoil the

prince of this world. The wilderness is the place in which Satan can be confronted because the wilderness offers Satan no place to hide. Jesus goes to the wilderness not because Satan is there but because nothing else is there, and so Satan – the enemy who is everywhere – can be exposed and confronted. That’s why as Christians we go on retreat. Not because the world is evil, but because the world is busy and full and messy and opaque. From time to time we need the stillness and the emptiness which God offers in particular places to be able to hear his voice.

The absence of temptation can, or should, be the absence of our misunderstandings, of our wrongheaded approach to Lent, to prayer, to trying to live with God. For the most important thing about Lent is just that – living with God. Rather than focusing on one specific temptation – be it chocolate or cognac or Facebook – rather than obsessing over particularities, we can allow ourselves the space to reflect that the whole of Lent is a gradual readjustment of our focus, a time

when we can, as the liturgy says, learn to be God's people once again.

We are limited by our circumstances – we are spending more time alone, more time with the same few people, more time not doing things which we would very much like to be doing. But at the same time, we are making progress, moving forward, seeing the signs of God's presence in our lives become more and more gradually visible. It is this which is the discipline, the learning, of Lent. And there is no test to pass, except the test already taken by the one who was in every respected tempted as we are, yet without sin.