

**Sermon for Lent 1, Year A**  
**26 February 2023**

Gen 2:7-9; 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

This week major newspapers have reported outrage over the editing by Puffin Books of Roald Dahl's works for children. In the name of updating the text for a more modern audience, quite a lot of content deemed "offensive" has been removed, much of which describes people and their bodies in a rather unforgiving manner for comic effect. But the idea that a satirical, rather naughty text can turn children cruel is absurd, especially to those of us who grew up reading and loving Roald Dahl. We devoured his tales of clever children making narrow escapes from witches and cruel aunts as lessons in daring and boldness and kindness, not the reverse.

If anything, the censorship of Dahl's books fails to understand the lesson of Horrible Histories, introduced so recently into my house: far from shying away from the revolting and outrageous (within reason), children glory in it, particularly within the safety of the page or screen, and incorporating gory details can be a good pedagogical method. A terrific example is a re-telling of the Three Little Pigs, in this case "Georgian Three Little Pigs", in which the first two piggy brothers, architects in straw and sticks, have their houses blown down in the usual way, but when they run down the road to seek safety in the handsome Georgian brick mansion belonging to their brother, the story goes off-piste, because he can't see them coming, and so they get eaten by the wolf. He can't see them coming because he has bricked up his windows to avoid paying the notorious 18th-century window tax.

Texts can be used in all sorts of ways, with all sorts of agendas: pedagogical, persuasive, diabolical. In today's gospel, the devil uses the scriptures themselves, trying to proof-text his way into tempting Christ. And if you were raised on fairy tales, the back of your neck might have prickled when you heard today's gospel and felt the rhythm of that story, that deliberate shaping that Matthew gives us, a rhetorically effective and memorable set of escalating stakes: the rule of three, employed just as

effectively here as in the Three Little Pigs or any story about three brothers, three wishes, or three temptations.

But whereas in a fairy story the devil might have won with his final offer, turning the direction of the tale at the climax, Jesus is in no danger of succumbing, and the evangelist makes this very clear from the outset. This is not Goldilocks and the surprisingly fragile third chair. Here we have three temptations, three rejections, and a final resounding defeat of the devil at the end. Christ's might, his success, is a foregone conclusion, which makes it all the more interesting that he is tempted in ways we ourselves might easily be, with appeals to the needs of the body, the ego, and our lust for power.

Today is only the fifth day of Lent, the first Sunday in Lent, and it's very possible that some of us started this season on Wednesday with rather grand ideas about what we might be able to give up or take on. I know that my own private list of things to achieve every single day was a tiny bit ridiculous. But it feels so good to be optimistic, to have an entire Lent of possibilities stretching out in front of us, our imagined virtuous selves being reformed - perhaps even re-formed - in our mind's eye. And effort itself can be transformative. But we can certainly take a lesson or two from Christ's own temptations. First, he went into the wilderness, led by the Spirit, to be tempted. To go into the wilderness means simplifying; paring down. Simplicity in Lent is to be commended. Each of us will find a different way to embrace it, but we should all remember that to be simple is a gift. It is to our spiritual benefit.

The second thing is that when Jesus was presented with those irresistible ideas of food after forty days of hunger, and spiritual and temporal power, he didn't just say "no, go away". There was a reason behind each refusal. He offers the devil a little theological lesson, a scriptural lesson, in response to each of his offers, by counter-quoting Deuteronomy.

Man shall not live by bread alone, he says, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God; and you shall not tempt the Lord your

God; and you shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.

The point is not that Jesus is a better proof-texter than the devil. It is that he knows and understands the scriptures better. The devil has failed to understand the crucial point, which is that love of God must be central to one's understanding of oneself, and that goes even for the Son of God. It is not about what Jesus feels he is entitled to; it is about loving and being obedient to God.

This passage is also the source of the expression "the devil can cite scripture for his purpose", which we find in *The Merchant of Venice*:

*The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.  
An evil soul producing holy witness  
Is like a villain with a smiling cheek,  
A goodly apple rotten at the heart:  
O, what a goodly outside falsehood hath!*

What a goodly outside falsehood hath: the outside is not always a reliable indicator of what lies beneath. Jesus himself, in the gospel for Ash Wednesday, warns against disfiguring the outside to demonstrate how good and pious we are on the inside; far better to wash your face and anoint your head - to be properly groomed, in other words - than to "disfigure" your face to show you miserable your fasting has made you. Far better to pray in your room with the door shut; and your Father, Jesus says, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Whatever our own private Lenten disciplines might be this year, let us not shy away from using this season to its full benefit, as a time to draw nearer to God. Not only by self-examination and repentance, by prayer, fasting, and self-denial, and by making one's confession; but also by reading and meditating on God's holy word. This is a time to immerse ourselves in scripture, perhaps through daily study, or through the readings in morning and evening prayer and the daily mass; because scripture tells the human story. It confronts the reality of human sin and the degradation that it can bring.

Children's books are often more honest on this subject than we might like; but the best ones take a page out of the gospels, reminding us that faithfulness, loyalty, kindness, and friendship exist alongside cruelty and suffering, and that love wins in the end. This is a message that shines out of scripture so brightly that no censorship could possibly obscure it: God's generous, redeeming love includes each of us, no matter how many times we fall, for he hates nothing that he has made. Let us use these forty days to draw closer to him in penitence, dwelling in his word, and trusting in his mercy.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.