

Lent 1 A February 10, 2008: St Aidan's & Wesley 10:30am Matthew 4. 1-11

Although it caused offence to some, I found *The Last Temptation of Christ* a fascinating film. It is one view of the last year of Jesus' life.

The controversy about the film revolved around the 'last temptation' it portrays Jesus as experiencing. As he hangs upon the cross, passing in and out of consciousness, Jesus imagines that he had in fact lived a normal life. In particular, he imagines that he had married and had a family, that he had grown old, and all because he decided to leave the cross behind.

That must have been a real temptation for Jesus - to be 'normal'. It's easy to imagine that happening to him. Yet the temptations we heard about this morning are not normal: turning stones into bread, standing on the spire of a temple, inheriting the kingdoms of the world. How are we to understand them?

The first thing is to say what we should not do with them. We should not reckon with this passage as if it were an historical event in the strict sense. Its intention is not to convey objective, biographical data about Jesus. I am going to take some time to explain this, because it is important.

We know this because of the way the story is told and because it compares very well to similar stories in the rabbinic tradition - the traditions of teaching in the way of the Jewish rabbis.

Remember - the early followers of Jesus were Jews. They grew up in Jewish families, they learnt Jewish laws and customs, read their scriptures; they worshipped and prayed with the Jewish community. Matthew was clearly very conscious of his Jewish audience and takes great care to teach the good news of Jesus in ways that Jewish people would understand. Matthew's is a good teaching technique: Talk to people in the language and the ways of thinking and learning to which they are already accustomed.

There are some obvious examples of Matthew doing just this. His Gospel has five sections and these five sections are thought to be a reflection of the five books of the Torah - the Jewish Law, or, as we have them, the first five books of the Bible.

Another example is the way Matthew tells the story of the birth of Jesus in a way that would lead his readers to compare Jesus directly to Moses. To achieve this link, Matthew has the story of Herod ordering, soon after the birth of Jesus, the slaughter of all the infant boys of Bethlehem. And we are told that Joseph, in response to the promptings of God in a dream, escapes with his wife and new son to Egypt.

Moses, of course, grew up in Egypt. And Moses, you might recall, grew up in the palace of the Pharaoh, because he was found in the water by Pharaoh's daughter; he was placed there in order to save him from the slaughter of all the Jewish infant males which had been ordered by Pharaoh.

The reason that Matthew begins his Gospel (in this Jewish way) is not because he is telling us exactly how Jesus spent his first two years. Matthew probably does not know, for certain, those details. He tells this story because he believes he does know for certain who Jesus is. Making the infancy story of Jesus very like the infancy story of Moses - placing Jesus in Egypt and having the monarch kill the infant boys - alerts his listeners to the nature and the destiny of the One whose story they have begun to read. This is the story of the new Moses, the new giver of God's Law, the new great teacher of Israel: a story about a new covenant.

To convey this awareness in his readers - or listeners - Matthew uses a rabbinic style of teaching called 'haggadic midrash'. Midrash is the bringing together of traditional or devotional stories from Jewish history in order to teach something about the past or to bring deeper understanding about something in the present.

Today, we have heard another example of this style of Jewish teaching from the very clever Jewish teacher named Matthew. There is, no doubt, a seed of an historic event within it (as with all midrash); a time when Jesus was, perhaps literally, in the wilderness. But its aim, like to birth story about the journey to Egypt, is not to tell us of an exact event, but to tell us about who Jesus is.

The first thing to note is that the Bible tell us that Moses spent forty days and nights fasting for a now very famous result, recorded in the book of Exodus:

The Lord said to Moses: Write these words; [and] in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel. He was there with the Lord forty days and nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments. (Exodus 34: 27, 28)

Jesus' fasting 'forty days and forty nights' is very reminiscent of this important event in the Moses story. Again, we are meant to see the link.

But the more important connection is to Israel's forty years wandering in the wilderness before coming into the promised land.

On each of the three occasions when Jesus is tempted, he responds to his tempter by quoting from Deuteronomy. Each of the passages he uses refer to the time that Israel spent in the wilderness - and the temptations they faced there. In fact, they are even in the same order. Yet, there is a difference.

Whereas Israel, called a 'son' by God in Hosea (11.1) and Deuteronomy (8.5), failed each of the tests, Jesus the 'new Son' shows what it means to meet temptation yet to stay singularly reliant on God, and singularly resolved to do God's will.

Let's just take one of those temptations in Matthew 4 as our example:

He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came to him and said to him, 'If you are the son of God, command these stones to become loaves of

bread.' But he answered, 'It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' (Matt 4.2-4)

Now let's trace the passage Matthew is weaving in here, in good midrash style. It is Deuteronomy 8. 2-3 (from which Jesus is quoting):

Remember the long way the Lord your God has led you [Israel] these forty years in the wilderness...He humbled you by letting you hunger...in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

Whereas God's "son" Israel grumbled in hunger throughout their time of testing in the wilderness, the 'new' son of God refuses to give way to temptation and mistrust. He draws strength from God and from the Scriptures. Human beings possess life not by consuming bread but simply and solely because it is God's will that they live. Jesus faithfully remembers that he is totally dependent upon God.

The message for the early Jewish audience became clear. The message for us is.... for us all to answer.

How do we do that? Store the promises of scripture in your heart. Keep your eyes on God. Trust God for everything. Remember your calling. Let God be God, and be ready, and have the courage, to say a firm no to the things that will tempt you to do otherwise.

The temptations found in Matthew and the temptations of the film are, in fact, the same - the temptation that Jesus should walk away from his calling; step back from the cross. But he didn't.

We are not asked to go to a cross. But we are asked to let God be God - in our lives, not just in someone else's.