

First Sunday in Lent

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Introduction

In 2001, Columba Press published Cecelia Clegg and Joe Liechty's extraordinary volume 'Moving Beyond Sectarianism'. This study — a result of years of research, group engagement, dialogue and analysis — explored the phenomenon of British-Irish sectarianism and proposed ways to (a) understand the impulses towards it and (b) move beyond those impulses. The two authors proposed that there is a 'scale' of sectarianism. This scale has 11 parts — moving from "You are different; I am different" at the most palatable end of the difference spectrum, to "You are evil" at the end.

This is relevant to the lectionary text for today. Jesus of Nazareth is in the desert and meets with the Devil, the embodiment of evil. So much of our lives is spent in turning away from the idea of calling people evil and calling their actions evil instead. So much conflict arises when we face evil behaviour — and, for many of us, the people we call evil because of their evil behaviour. What do we do in light of this? Does Jesus' engagement with the Tempter from Matthew's gospel offer us any insights into the everyday conflicts we find ourselves party to? (Answer: yes; but don't go calling each other *Satan*.)

Text

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came 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.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Comment

When I was 15, I was part of a summer Church festival. It was extraordinary — I met some great friends, went on some exciting adventures to some caves (the Marble Arch Caves in Co. Fermanagh), crossed the border multiple times, and also found myself able to make some decisions about my religion that felt like my decisions, not the decisions taken for me.

After the camp, I came home with some new friends, some new cross-border experiences, some new devotions and an extraordinary commitment to seeing the Devil everyday. I’d pray at night: and reflect on the day, and read a text, and name requests for all the people I loved, and then I’d rebuke the Devil. I don’t know who told me to do that — it might have been a practice I’d invented all by my very own self — but it was extraordinary how, when I went looking for the Devil, I found the Devil. Of course, most of the areas in my life where I found Lucifer were the areas where I was conflicted: about sex, about jealousies, about rage I couldn’t express. It’s more entertaining to rebuke Satan than reflect on Self. Much of my own spiritual commitment has been nurtured by criticising overt reliances on Devil Diagnosis. And yet, and yet, and yet, we have this week’s text.

Jesus is in the Wilderness, and after fasting for 40 days, he is hungry and is visited by the Tempter. This encounter itself occurs in two gospels — that of Luke and this text from Matthew — and is referred to only briefly in the gospel of Mark “And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.” (Mark 1:12–13) and not at all in John.

The three temptations are interesting. In Luke, it goes: Bread / Mountain / Temple, perhaps because Luke’s over-arching concern is ‘What will happen when Jesus gets to Jerusalem?’. However in Matthew’s gospel, the order goes: Bread / Temple / Mountain — with a more topographical concern. This journey towards a mountaintop also mirrors the literary features of Moses’ journey. At one point it was even considered that the five sermons of Matthew’s gospel echoed the five books of the Torah; however that analysis is a fanciful thing of the mid 20th century. What is interesting, however, is that Matthew is depicting Jesus’ ministry being pre-figured by a time of alone-ness in the wilderness, and a time where Jesus has to come face to face with something.

It seems too easy to imagine that the Devil character — the Greek of Matthew's text has him named as *Diabolos* and the *Peirazo* (the Tempter) and finally, in Jesus' words "away with you, *Satan!*" the word originating in Job's extraordinary poem — *Satan*, the Adversary — is used. The conflict is occurring on a few levels. There is the first, and obvious, level: Jesus is being confronted with something that he might want, namely, bread, or power or wealth. Jesus is not without bread, power or finances, the question is what the quality of his relationship with these events will be. Will they have power over him, or will he use bread, power and finance for other purposes. The gospel writer plays a subtle story on us. The drama of the Devil — does he have goaty feet and hooves and horns and fire for his eyes? — masks the fact that temptation comes to us about things that are justifiable. Jesus did need sustenance, connection, a sense of his power. Hidden underneath the supernatural image of a Tempter appearing to a hungry pilgrim in a desert is a story of how we must all — especially in times of weakness — come into conflict with the reasonable things we desire. It is reasonable to desire to survive, but what values might we compromise on as we survive?

Conflict — especially dramatic conflict — can come with such high power that it can be easy to abandon those practices of virtue and justice that we know are most important. This text demonstrates a person at their end, who nonetheless can reflect on choices as if he were making them freely, even if he wasn't. He was hungry, making choices about the ethics of how he filled his belly. He was friendless, making choices about how he would conduct his social affairs. He was without influence, making choices about the quality of how he'd wield power.

For us, too. May we — in conflict — have repeated phrases, poems, mantras, prayers that continue to turn us to what will centre us.

Response

Strange as it may seem, it might be interesting for groups of people to talk about their temptations, especially the mild ones. By this, I don't mean to have the equivalent of public confession, but rather to tell everyday stories about a time when you thought about something small, and decided to do it — or not do it —. What was involved, what returned you to the practice of a virtue that held you.

It could be about a seemingly small lie; or a choice about whether to recycle; or not participating in an event that was exclusionary; or not challenging a pejorative statement; or giving credit; or not giving credit.

So many experiences of distress and conflict could be alleviated if we didn't feel so alone. How can we create hospitality and community in narrating stories of challenge: little and large, in the right kinds of supportive environments.

Prayer

Jesus in the wilderness —
your mouth
must have tasted of sand;
your skin must have been dry
and your body weak.
What kept you steady?
Jesus, keep us steady
in the practice of what is

true and just and beautiful.
Because even hungry, even alone,
even insignificant
you were held steady
by the old prayers
and older words
in your heart.
Jesus keep us steady.

Amen.

Season: Lent

Themes: Inner Journey