

In Training - Gospel Reading: Matthew 4:1-11

I want to tell you a story about my call to ordination. I was 38 years old, just married with a child on the way, and was very involved in the life of my church in preaching, worship leading, PCC etc, having been a former treasurer. I felt called to offer myself for ordination and had done some courses with the Diocese, and then went for a 48 hour residential interview. On 11<sup>th</sup> May I got the letter saying I was accepted for training, and 7 days later Matthew was born – an interesting week.

I spent two years at Theological college in Bristol before my curacy in Stoke on Trent. Now why couldn't I just get on with the business of being a clergyperson? Why the need to study and be with other ordinands? It is something called spiritual formation. We unfairly called Theological college a vicar factory, but there was some truth in that. One of the things it taught me was to step back and think about issues and situations differently, and not to jump in with a pre-conceived way of looking at things. There I met people equally sincere who had different points of view from myself, and I had to reflect on these and not say "You are wrong I am right." it was great to do practical work – I did a training at a church in Bristol and at a hospital, but the training has given me resources for ministry, in ways I could not have foreseen when I was there. Some of the issues I faced there are key to understanding the issues now.

Jesus was called into ministry at his baptism – in the passage just before our reading from Matthew 4, but before he was put out into ministry he was as one version puts it, tested in the desert. Jesus has just had a wonderful spiritual experience of his baptism – he has been anointed with the Holy Spirit as a dove, and the father has confirmed Him in his identity as the Son of God. Wonderful! If you or I were Jesus you might be thinking "Great, let's get among the poor and comfort them, let's get among the sick and heal them, let's get among the people and teach them." You see Jesus has a mission, a purpose, but no, the Spirit leads him into the desert, or as Mark's gospel puts it, "thrust" Jesus into the desert. This is a time of testing for the Son of God – is He going to be up to the task –yes, he is the Son of God in his divinity, but he is also the Son of man in his humanity. Jesus has not just come to do good, heal the sick, proclaim the good news; He is to be good news about modelling a complete dependence on His father, always doing what the Father was doing, and nothing more or less. How could He know what was the Father's will and what was His own 'human' will- any when the choice is to be made, will He obey the Father's will when it conflicts with His own. That is the question that Jesus will be confronted with again and again. And so this testing and training is necessary as a preparation to fighting the real battles ahead.

Therefore, does God the Father let Jesus loose on His ministry straight after His baptism. Not on your life! Jesus must be tested first. Is it God's way or humanity's way. This is the reality of the temptation in the desert, and let us look at the passage in Matthew 4 now. All these temptations are about getting Jesus to use His spiritual power for worldly ends

- 1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.**
- 2 He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.**
- 3 The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."**

Using spiritual power to meet one's own physical needs- Jesus can do this – he feeds the 5000 and 4000 later, but this is to provide others with food, to demonstrate his Messiahship, all rabbis believed that the true Messiah would re-perform Moses miracle of manna in the desert. So, the devil says, you can do it, go on use your power to meet your needs. In the parable of the wise and foolish man, Jesus counsels his hearers to build their lives on the solid rock of His words. Jesus has been taking his own medicine, he has been building his life on the solid rock of God's word – in this case from Deuteronomy in the Old Testament

**4 But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"**

Jesus will wait for his father to provide for Him, He will not use his power to meet his own physical needs. This is a real temptation, especially for Christian leaders – to obtain money or material comfort, or sexual domination by virtue of your position. The only remedy is dependence on God, and trust in His word

Then comes the second temptation, and this is more subtle as the devil quotes scripture **5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 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.'"**

You have miraculous powers – do a show, let people see how great you are, after all you are the Son of God, your father will look after you. This is really a question of who are you serving. Do we think that God is there to meet our needs, like some automated chocolate slot machine – in goes our prayer and God provides for us? Do we complain when our way of life is threatened by illness or difficulty, do we say that God has abandoned us? Is our faith in God dependent on things going well for us, and when they do not we get disillusioned? Who is in charge - us or God? If God calls us to deny ourselves and carry the cross and follow Christ, will we follow this, or will we say – that is too much, God is being unfair, I want an easier time? Jesus instead said this **In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!"**

Jesus again answers from Deuteronomy **"Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"**

Jesus will only do what His Father is doing – even if it involves a cross.

Lastly, the temptation that is most attractive – have everything you want

**8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour;**

**9 and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."**

You can have it all – only by-pass the cross, do not bother with the suffering servant, you can have the world back – only worship the devil. Have power but get it by corrupt means, have a slightly different call than the one God has given you, who will know? This is something that the Church today must face in looking at its declining role in society – how is it to make its voice heard- by glossy adverts or political and social action? One writer has said this

**“A marketing strategy is important; political involvement is important; but when we substitute any other means for transforming society than dependence on God, we undercut the very basis of our mission. Where the church flirts with political power to enforce public morality it must become all the more conscious of its need for spiritual renewal.”**

**10 Jesus said to the devil, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"**

Again, Deuteronomy, God's solid word as His foundation Jesus has withstood the test – he is now ready for His public ministry, where He will face these temptations again and again. But now, God the Father knows, and Jesus knows, that Jesus can overcome the devil, by dependence on God and His word.

Then and only then, does God provide for Him. **11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.**

What does this all mean for you and me today? I think firstly, it shows the need for good solid foundations – knowing God's word, disciplines of prayer, of worship, of service for the church and the world. This is the resource Jesus depended on and we can do no better than follow His example. But more fundamentally I believe, it shows that in the Christian life, we will go through times of testing ourselves – not because God is punishing us- but because he loves us and wants to use us in the service of His kingdom. But can we be trusted with this work – as Jesus said. **Lu 16:10 "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.** And the greater the task ahead, the greater the testing that will come before you are allowed to go ahead with it. **MLJ the greatest tragedy is of a Christian who achieves much before they are ready.**

What is the temptation facing us as individuals today? I have not got a window into your own soul, as Elizabeth I said once, and there maybe issues that you are struggling with, and if it would help You can always come and talk to me, but I believe the Greatest temptation Jesus faced and we face it today when we are tempted to collude with the society around us and compromise our faith and beliefs. I may be wrong, but not many of us are tempted to visit houses of ill repute and to get drunk or to be drug addicts or to embezzle millions – if that is a problem for you please see me. But I believe the temptations we face in our Christian lives are much more subtle, hidden, and so much insidious, because they can be with us for years and perhaps we do not notice it – only when others point it out, or we face a crisis are we made aware of it. It is the temptation to collude with society around us for an easier life, and avoid the taking up of the cross. We can be well thought of by others for being 'nice people' and we do, more than others, charitable and community work- and very creditable it is too. But the temptation is when we rely on this sense of well-being that comes from doing 'the right things' and somehow start to think badly of those who do not quite measure up to our own standards. This relying on our own righteousness, and not on the righteousness of Jesus.

And Christian leaders especially are prone to the temptation to collude with their congregations when they want to stay where they are, comfortable and inward looking – affirming the good, yes, but keeping things in a 'holy huddle. , and the leader knows that God is calling the church to face outwards and focus on its mission to others. You can have

great popularity as a leader if you give the people what they want, but is that what God wants? Where in all of this is taking up the cross and following Christ? The temptation is to puff ourselves up, even with our own Christian commitment and activity. The antidote to this is training in prayer and the knowledge of God's word, things we are counselled to do more of in Lent, and rigorous self-examination – taking steps back and reflecting on our lives on situations and asking ourselves, "Why did that meeting not work out as well as I hoped, was I too pushy, did I not listen to the other persons point of view enough, Did I push myself forward too much, did I want to show people how important my role is? This training is vital, and where we make mistakes to be honest with ourselves and with God, and put it right with God, and sometimes with the people we have upset by our actions.

I want to finish with a poem I wrote – about the parable of the Pharisee and the publican – the one where the Pharisee in his prayer thanks God that he is such an upright citizen compared with the bad living publican, and the publican just prays 'God be merciful to me a sinner', and it is the publican who goes home justified before God. The poem is about the subtle ways we can puff ourselves up, and by implication condemn others. This was ultimately the temptation Jesus faced in the desert, and it is the greatest temptation we face today, I believe

**The Pharisee and the Publican**

Brian Williams prays in church,  
He 'socially' connects,  
A Guardianista, Labour member,  
So politically correct.  
He's carbon-neutral, intellectual,  
Affirming Catholic, so 'effectual'  
At public works, and so he prays:

***At least I'm not like him,  
That 'so-called' Christian there,  
He reads 'The Daily Mail' and 'Sun'.  
He voted Brexit and is no fun.  
At least I'm not like him,  
That 'so-called' Christian there.***

Peter Harris prays in church,  
His bible quotes abound,  
He's never known to mix with fools,  
His church is known as 'sound.'  
His zeal is strict, his doctrine's clear,  
To fundamentalists he is dear,  
He wants revival in old ways,  
He's predestined, so he prays:

***At least I'm not like him,  
That 'so-called' Christian there,  
He's ignorant of bible verses,***

***He gambles, drinks and often curses,  
At least I'm not like him,  
That 'so-called' Christian there.***

Tony Stadler prays in church,  
He is High Church to a tee,  
Has Daily Mass, serves at the altar,  
He recites the liturgy.  
He knows his Saints' days, is a mystic,  
Bows and crosses, ritualistic,  
And throughout the incense haze  
And many rosaries he prays:

***At least I'm not like him,  
That 'so-called' Christian there,  
He makes no effort to confess,  
And when he comes, he makes a mess,  
At least I'm not like him,  
That 'so-called' Christian there.***

Simon Graham prays in church,  
It is his pride and joy,  
He cuts the grass, and rings its bells,  
He's done so since a boy,  
He raises money for the spire  
And extra music for the choir,  
Every appeal -he's first who pays  
Into the fund, and so he prays:

***At least I'm not like him,  
That 'so-called' Christian there,  
He never volunteers to clean,  
At P.C.C's he's never seen,  
At least I'm not like him,  
That 'so-called' Christian there.***

Kevin Masters prays in church,  
He's Bass Clerk in the choir,  
'Traditional' is his only love,  
Church music stokes his fire.  
Processions, Matins, Evensong,  
He hates the sermons overlong,  
Masonic brother nowadays,  
To Universal God he prays:

***At least I'm not like him,  
That 'so-called' Christian there,  
His voice is loud, can't sing the chants,  
And in the hymns, he tries to dance.  
At least I'm not like him,  
That 'so-called' Christian there,***

Martin Bridger prays in church,  
He is a charismatic,  
He speaks in tongues, raises his hands,  
Some call him a fanatic.  
With 'words of knowledge' he is saying,  
Then on the carpet, he is laying,  
Shouting out the blessed phrase,  
His eyes closed tightly as he prays:

***At least I'm not like him,  
That 'so-called' Christian there,  
His lack of fervour is the limit,  
Does he truly have 'The Spirit'?  
At least I'm not like him,  
That 'so-called' Christian there.***

Rejected people pray in church,  
Cursed by Christians whose great pride  
Puffs up and blinds them to their 'logs',  
While other's 'specks' are magnified,  
But Jesus hears their prayers of grief,  
And softly speaks the kindly word,  
But boastful critics He rejects,  
Their selfish prayers just seem absurd.

Whate'er we do for 'lesser' folk,  
We truly do it to Our Lord,  
When we put others down, He grieves,  
It always strikes a jarring chord.  
When we mark 'specks' in others' ways,  
And fail to see 'logs' in our own,  
However holy is our phrase,  
Our own hypocrisy is shown.

If only we could see the pain,  
That our boastful words proclaim,  
We'd never speak like that again,  
And we would hang our heads in shame.  
In denigrating others, we  
In truth, declare ourselves as 'lost',  
Amazing Grace we cannot see,  
And we despise our Lord's great cost.

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