

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

Preached by Cuddesdon Ordinand Jonny Scott, Sunday 9th March, 2014, the First Sunday in Lent. St Peter's Wolvercote.

Genesis 2:15 - 3:7 Romans 5:12-19 Matthew 4:1-11

As with so many great Gospel stories, there is often a line or two that I fail to remember until I read them again afresh. If you asked me to recall this passage I'd mention all the usual bits: the wilderness, the 40 days, the devil, the temptations, and the bit about the stones into bread. But the ending to this passage often eludes memory.

Away with you Satan!

¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him

If I were to don my amateur theologians hat, I would say that this moment in Matthew differs slightly to the account in Luke where much of the narrative detail is replicated, but then at the end the devil simply “departs from him until an opportune time”. No, for Matthew, the rejection of the devil does not just remove the force until a later date, but rather there is a sudden change from the presence of evil to the presence of good. *“Angels came and waited on him.”*

Yes, I forget this bit.

When I meet passages like this I always want to just think what it must have been like for Jesus then.

The vicar from my sending church was a great man. Father Tim was a white man in Zimbabwe though he trained down the road at Wycliffe Hall. He built a little church outside Harare called St Luke's and it grew into a great church that began to threaten the authorities. By 2007 he knew his life was in danger and for the sake of his wife and daughters fled to Jersey with little more than the shirt on his back.

That's where I got to know him. He baptized my wife and he married us and he will remain a good friend for a long time.

Father Tim taught us to place ourselves right into the heart of the Gospel stories - to try and imagine what it must have felt like to be there at that time.

40 days. 40 baking hot days. And 40 freezing cold nights.

This wasn't a 'daylight-hours' fast like Muslims so faithfully observe at Ramadan, but day and night he fasted.

He was *famished*.

A carpenter from Nazareth. Not surrounded and encouraged by the disciples he is yet to choose.

Alone.

With no possessions.

With only the thoughts of the baptism that had proceeded this.

He hadn't chosen to go. The Spirit had led him and he had been obedient.

I noted that in Matthews account the only words we hear Jesus say before this point are, "It should be done, for we must carry out all that God requires." Such unwavering faithfulness and obedience were the only things Jesus carried with him in the wilderness.

As part of my academic study here in Oxford I often have to test the historic validity of the Gospel accounts. Some scholars tend to think that all bible stories are simply allegories; that 40 days in the wilderness is just an allusion to the 40 years that Israel wandered after crossing the Red Sea. That the wilderness is a metaphor for doubt or that the devil is just a literary figure.

I haven't made my mind up about a lot of things. But, I do not sign up to that. I don't think that takes us anywhere. When it comes to the Gospels, I believe the identity of our Lord Jesus is intimately forged in the truth of the experiences he

encountered, and I believe these 40 days would have resounded throughout the rest of Jesus' life as they resound for us now.

Because when the devil arrives, he is not a metaphor. He is a very real and incarnate presence, he is a walking and talking being. He knows intimately the human hunger that Jesus must have felt. He takes Jesus to the top of the tallest building in the greatest city - when Jesus would have seen nothing but scrub for 40 days.

And whilst in every response to the devil Jesus quotes the scriptures - "it is written; it is written; it is written." - at the third time of temptation Jesus lets out a cry with words entirely of his own choosing. ***Away with you, Satan!...***

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

We should all read C. S. Lewis' Screwtape letters at some stage in our discipleship, for they paint a very valuable picture of how the devil might work. In it, the devil delights when we do either of two things:

- When we blow the devil out of all proportion and see him at work in everything. Because then we miss his creativity and never notice the evil we ourselves are capable of - and besides the world will think us mad!
- Or on the other hand, when we politely (and rather Englishly) ignore him all together and prefer to only blame ourselves, or one another - or the weather. And we let the devil carry on about his way unhindered.

I believe as we enter into Lent and are called to confront the priorities in our lives, and our relationship with God -

there will be times when we blame ourselves and pray for forgiveness;
or when we realise we are blaming others and pray for reconciliation;
or when we admit weakness and pray to God for strength.

But there also need to be times when we stand up alongside God and name those darkneses in our lives where the only right thing we can say is "Away with you Satan".

Because yes I believe we are fallen and that we too often choose our own freedom and interests and run away from God, just as Adam and Eve did in the Garden in our first reading. We choose disobedience and are separated from Gods love. And yes, just as in our Epistle, I believe that we have justification and life with Jesus through his great act of righteousness. That however far we have run from God or how distant we are, he has brought us home through Christ. I believe that.

But I also believe that there is another player in the game. We all have different names for him - the bible uses at least a dozen - but his presence is insistent. Just as in the wilderness, he will often find us at our lowest ebb and offer us what looks like a way out. He may offer to carry our burden, but the interest soon mounts up.

However ethereal or insidious this evil presence may seem, C. S Lewis was right about how straight forward it can be to defeat.

It doesn't require an overblown exorcism.

But nor does it go away if we ignore it.

Just as Christ did. We need to name and unmask and confront the devil with simple words. ***Away with you Satan. You shall worship The Lord your God, and him alone shall you serve.***

And what happens when we unmask the devil and confront him in his work?

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The devil cannot work when he has been named. Like recovery for an addiction, the first step - the one that makes all the subsequent steps possible - is to admit that it exists.

There's a great line in the film the Usual Suspects; (spoiler alert) when the seemingly innocent witness is revealed to have been the villain along "the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist."

And so for the person suffering under the weight of it, their suffering occurs in silence. Or for each of us when we feel the downward pressure of it, we end up blaming ourselves.

But Christ shows us a different way. He shows us how to act. We expose the devil and we turn to The Lord.

And in our gospel, when the Devil's tide sinks out, the angels flood in. That's the flip-side. The space is made for grace to flow.

Jesus. For 40 days and 40 nights. No food. Little sleep. A constant barrage of temptation by the devil himself..... *and suddenly angels came and waited on him*

We can begin to imagine the suffering that Jesus would have endured in the wilderness.

I can begin to understand what that temptation feels like, because I have faced it myself just as all of us have.

But that release! That overwhelming release when the devil is scattered and the angels suddenly flood into the void and tend to us. That's the moment I want to witness!

When I told my close friends what I was preaching on today one of them sent me a prayer, part of which I will share with you now.

"Now Holy spirit
Drive us out
If you must
If the time is really upon us
Send us into the desert place

But be there with us
Give us the strength to resist the temptation
To gain our esteem from an audience
That endlessly applauds
If only we would endlessly serve

Ourselves alone

Give us, o searching spirit
The strength to resist the temptation
To gain our safety
From the one who can secure it
When we forgo only our hope
Of entering the future place
And when we yield
Please
Our ransom be."

Lent is a time for reflection on ourselves.

And for reflection on our relationship with God and our relationship with the world.
And, if even for a short time, for reflection on those areas in our lives where
darkness can be commanded to leave, and where the light of the angels - where the
light of love - can begin to reign again.

Amen