

First Sunday of Lent Year A (2020)

Illusions

In 2003 the police were called to a 19-story public housing block in New York city after residents found Antoine Yates, a 31-year-old resident, in the entrance hall with nasty wounds to his arm and leg. Yates said that he had been attacked by a pit-bull terrier on the street and so was taken off for treatment at the local hospital. A couple of days later, a person made an anonymous phone call to the police to say that there was a wild animal in Yates's apartment. When the police gingerly explored the apartment, they found a 500lb Bengal tiger Yates had bought as a cub, together with a 3-foot-long alligator. Fortunately both were successfully rehoused after tranquilization, and Mr Yates charged with reckless endangerment!

I suppose it is true to say that our readings on this first Sunday of Lent face us with the knowledge that the way we live our lives comes fundamentally down to the choices we make – some profound and others which involve an almost daily occurrence. Mr Yates chose a dangerous course without thinking of the consequences of the attendant questions underlying the wild world of nature – perhaps only viewing his desire for companionship with wild animals through rose-tinted spectacles. In this sense, he built his hopes on illusion – something which is also a running theme in today's readings.

You might remember that saying: 'Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the serpent, and the serpent hadn't got a leg to stand on.' Rather a hoary one, but the sense behind it illuminates the question of personal responsibility. The account of Adam and Eve is ancient (it could be more ancient than the seven-day account before it in Genesis 1 – there is no general consensus). What is clear is that aetiology underlines all that happens in the unfolding action. Why did certain things happen? Mortality, the relationship between male and female, human toil, nakedness versus clothing, the question of right and wrong, power; all explored and given meaning whilst drawing our attention to an omniscient God who loves and cares for creation. We must add to this the growing sense of self-awareness Adam and Eve experience. Through this awareness a garden of paradise becomes illusory and turns into thorny scrubland of toil, whilst the idyll of innocent humanity breaks down into pain in childbirth and the reality of everyday life for humanity.

Illusions are at the heart of the Gospel accounts of the Temptations of the Lord too. Matthew gives us the sense of revelation and self-disclosure by Jesus who is Spirit-led into that ten by thirty-mile dry wilderness between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea. This seems an appropriate setting in which he wrestles with the nature of his Messiahship before he starts his ministry. The cunning nature of temptation is to the fore, as it is in the Creation account. The basics of the human necessity of food opens the scenario and is followed by an altogether more subtle one involving divine relationship. If God really loves you, he won't allow you to be harmed. Go on – test the Divine One. Then come the question of earthly power – an elemental desire that runs through human and natural history. Adam and Eve eat the apple because they believe (with no proof at all) that it will make them like God.

Jesus responds to all these illusions of earthly desire with the reality of Divine Love, which turns power on its head and through example provide our call to participation in the life of the Kingdom by following his example. At the same time, the temptations reveal the identification of Jesus with the trials and tribulations which face each one of us within our own lives.

Paul gives us a powerful commentary on a world where so many illusions are on offer to draw us away from God that sometimes we struggle to break free. Yet what lies at the heart of our faith is the wondrous gift and example of self-giving love. Paul might lay the trowel on rather thickly in the way he presents this, but there is no doubt that he seeks to enable each one of us, knowing the gift of free-will, to understand the fulness of life open to us in following Jesus. He, the One filled with the Holy Spirit, uses that indwelling of God to overcome temptation. In following him, in allowing the comfort of the working of the Holy Spirit within our own lives, we have the exemplar to the way in which we lead our lives. We are provided with both the direction in which we should travel, and the strength to do so even when we are 'tested' ourselves.

In not living on bread alone, we are called to challenge the materialism of our age. Neither are we to test God by turning the Divine One into an idol through our own feeble manipulations. Regarding power, we have the call to follow the one who was a servant of all – meaning that although we may wield power and responsibility ourselves, we are always to use them remembering that we are ultimately called to serve, as Jesus served us.

Thus, we come to know that he is revealed as the one in whom we experience life at the deepest levels of our experience through the inward working of the Holy Spirit. Through the waters of Baptism, we enter new lives of Resurrection in the Lord - signs to the world of God's grace – opening up to us the deepest joy of journeying towards the heart of God's Love, sustained even in the most difficult moments of our lives.

This universal message reveals that, in the words of Paul, *'the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounds for the many.'*

This is our Lenten journey, and indeed of life itself. No tigers or alligators, no dry wilderness, but the richness, reality and certainty of love beyond compare, together with the call to share this gift in all we do.



Adam – Window in Canterbury Cathedral c.1176

Genesis 2: 15-17; 3: 1-7

¹⁵The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.’

3 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God say, “You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?”’ ²The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³but God said, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.”’ ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die; ⁵for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God,^[a] knowing good and evil.’ ⁶So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. ⁷Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Romans 5: 12-19

¹²Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned— ¹³sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. ¹⁴Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

¹⁵But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. ¹⁶And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man’s sin. For the judgement following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. ¹⁷If, because of the one man’s trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

¹⁸Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. ¹⁹For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.

Matthew 4: 1-11

4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ ⁴But he answered, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone,

but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”’

⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying 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.”’

⁷Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”’

⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; ⁹and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ ¹⁰Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

“Worship the Lord your God,

and serve only him.”’

and serve only him.”’

¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.