

## First Sunday of Lent – 26<sup>th</sup> February 2023

In March 2022 as refugees were streaming out of Ukraine, George Butler made his way into the country. He is an artist and reporter of crisis situations and he was there to draw the effects of war. He drew abandoned tanks among broken trees, people camping on the platforms of the metro, ordinary life continuing in extraordinary circumstances. And a week or two ago a member of the congregation gave Christ Church a framed print of one of his drawings. It shows a statue of St Michael, patron Saint of Kyiv, protected by sandbags and surrounded by the detritus of war. As we mark the anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine we will put that print in the St Michael chapel as a focus for our thoughts and prayers for all those caught up in the bubble of evil that is enveloping Ukraine. That is what it is. Evil. The effects of the war are death, fear, destruction, bereavement, hunger, deprivation and the danger of escalation of that war into something even bigger and more dangerous.

George Butler's response to that evil is countercultural. He moved towards it and, with his God-given skill, brought back a report of what is to be found there. According to Mark's Gospel, Jesus went into the wilderness in response to his baptism. At the baptism the Holy Spirit had descended as a dove, a voice had acknowledged him as the beloved son of God and immediately he went into the wilderness alone, without food or shelter. For forty days he was silent as he journeyed into the human heart and brought back a report of what he found there.

What he found was the potential for evil. Afterwards he spoke of three examples. There was the temptation to turn stones into bread for himself, which is a temptation to view the power of God as magic. Today it is fashionable to talk about 'manifesting,' a belief popular amongst celebrities and on the web that if we want something very much, usually wealth or success, our desire will bend the universe to make it happen. That is not the same as imploring God to make God's own goodness known through healing and blessing and feeding. It is a belief in magic and Jesus disowns it.

There was the temptation to the ungodly act of self-destruction in order to provoke a miracle: 'If you are the beloved Son of God you can throw yourself down and the angels will uphold you.' And there was the temptation to power and wealth beyond the will of the Father: 'Bow down and worship me (the devil) and I will give you power and wealth.'

Jesus as a man discovered in the human soul a temptation to self-absorption which leads us to believe that we, not God, can do miracles, to arrogance, and to a compass error in our attention to God. That compass error is a deviation towards our own power or comfort or success rather than obeying God's will.

Jesus didn't give in. But when he came out of the desert he spoke of his temptations. Like George Butler he gave a frontline report and, crucially, he told us how he dealt with them. In response to each temptation he quoted from the Bible. The Son of God, with his uniquely close relationship with the Father, had the humility to refer back to the wisdom of the Old Testament. The Old Testament is a record of the revelation of God to human beings for the 2000 or so years before Jesus, and was

Jesus' Bible. The New Testament had not yet been written. Jesus' words point us back to the primacy of the Bible.

'We don't live only by bread but by the words of God,' he quotes. 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test,' 'Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.'

The story of evil in the third chapter of Genesis is one of the early stories of the Old Testament. It mirrors the understanding which Jesus brought back from the wilderness. Both are stories of evil. The story of Adam and Eve explains evil in terms of arrogance. Creation is good but not everything in it is good for us. Iron may be made into cooking pots or into weapons to kill animals for food, or it may be made into weapons to commit murder. According to the story of Adam and Eve, Eve chose to ignore the words of God - 'You may not eat' - preferring the words of the tempter - 'You may eat' - because they coincided with her own desires. In the wilderness, though he was starving, Jesus chose the words of God - 'Man does not live by bread alone' - over the temptation of his own desire for food.

The point of both stories is the importance of obedience to the word of God. I'm not sure if fasting in Lent is important. There is a historical precedent, and provided we are well physically and mentally it should do us no harm. But I wonder if the point of the story of Jesus' temptations is that in the silence and solitude we discover things about ourselves we may not like but we need to recognise.

We are made of dust; we are evolved from animals; and as a result still hold, as part of our genetic inheritance, tendencies to self-absorption, arrogance and ambition.

But we also know that Jesus has experienced all those temptations and not given in to them. He demonstrates that we can let go of self-absorption, arrogance and ambition. This Lent, let's use the traditional resources of the people of God to move closer to God. Read the Bible, or other helpful books. There are some available in Christ Church. Use some gentle fasting, perhaps giving up coffee, tea, sugar or chocolate. Without those comfort blankets we may find ourselves in the wilderness, face to face with our own failures and inadequacies. Then, like Jesus, we will have to fall back on the word of God.