

## Commitment 21 Feb 21

Commitment is a tough call - if you're going to do it properly. Whether it is building a marriage, training a dog or making a cake - none of these has a chance of success unless you are committed 100%. Half measures will not do. If Jesus, knowing what was being asked of him, had shirked his ministry and taken a different path - like Jonah heading off on a ship in the opposite direction when he had been told to go and speak to the people of Nineveh - we would probably never have heard of him, and certainly not been impacted by his life.

With commitment I would align 'honesty', for without that you are only lying to others, yourself and the God of your understanding.

I need to be committed to you and this parish or I will be of no value to you. You, also, need to be committed to me or I will not be able to work with you. I cannot - nor do I intend - to try and fill Vicar Dave's shoes. I have my own to walk in, and my steps are likely to be different. Although it is right and proper that you should grieve his going, you need to leave that in the past and turn again to look forward. As someone once said; 'When you look back, don't stare.'

Now, much as I like Mark's abrupt and abbreviated style of writing, there are some passages that don't really do justice to the substance of what is there to be unpacked. And being that we are now in Lent, I feel that we should focus on the temptations of Jesus, rather than the baptism. We can cover that another time. I want to dig into the dirt of the story of Jesus' temptations because I think that they have real and timely relevance to all of us in our daily lives, and specifically in Lent. For that reason I am going to allow myself to use more of the explanation provided in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, where more detail is given. The two short verses that Mark's gospel allocates to this

pivotal moment in Jesus' life are not enough, in my opinion.

Where I like Mark's version is in his use of the word 'drove' (ekballei) - the Spirit **drove** Jesus out into the desert. Matthew and Luke use the milder word 'led' - the Spirit **led** Jesus out. The verb used for 'drove' is the same as is used for when Jesus **drives** out demons. It is an irresistible force - there's nothing gentle about it.

And I think there's something quite fitting about my appointment to All Saints at the beginning of Lent, as it gives us all a kick in the pants to do some serious housekeeping. We need to be driven here, and not gently led. We need to sense that we are being kicked hard

and told in no uncertain terms to 'clean house' - not softly invited, 'would you like to clear out a few drawers?'

With that forceful incentive should come the 100% commitment to do the job properly. As old timers like my grandfather used to say, 'If a job's worth doing, it's worth doing well'. Or, 'Do the best you can, not the worst you dare.'

But cleaning out our mental junk is neither easy nor something we really want to do, if we're honest with ourselves. I actually don't like looking into the darker corners of my life, and I certainly would be very uncomfortable with Jesus looking into them. But that's what

it takes. We have to accept that Jesus comes along with a warrant that says, 'I need to search your house - and that means ALL of it.'

The temptations that Jesus faced were both practical and metaphorical - the latter of which should please the 'progressives' among you!

Clearly, the first is an obvious one - turn stones into bread. Jesus had been fasting; of course he was hungry. Both Matthew and Luke state that. I don't know if any of you have had experience of going without food for any length of time, but it can play tricks with your mind. So I suggest that the other two

temptations are the result of disordered cerebral metabolism.

Jesus thinks that he could fall from a great height and not be hurt; not only not be hurt, but be gently lifted up by angels and not even scratched on a stone. What a comforting thought! He must have been feeling at the end of his tether, and a little voice inside him tells him he could end it all so sweetly. For the devil, Jesus' suicide would be a huge triumph. Remember, at this point, Jesus hasn't started his ministry, and as true man he has not yet experienced what divine power the baptism he has just undergone has imbued him with. He needs to feel the force of the Holy Spirit - the Greek word is pneuma and can also mean

Breath or Wind of God - and all are needed to drive out the inertia, illusion and fear that might hold him back from answering his Father's call to His purpose.

So, too, does that same pneuma invite us to enter truth and gain freedom.

And Jesus' last temptation - to worship Satan and to rule the whole world; I imagine that the hypoglycaemic brain could easily think that if oblivion in suicide was not on the cards, then the best of what the world could offer would be a tasty way to spend one's life.

You may not agree with my interpretation of these temptations, but I believe that most, if

not all our temptations come from within. We like to depict them as coming from someone outside of ourselves and we call it the devil or Satan - indeed, every artist's impression of the temptation of Christ has a devil figure skulking somewhere in it, offering Jesus bread or showing him the kingdoms of the world, or on a high pinnacle of the temple - or in one representation I saw, the devil was offering an apple, clearly tempting the Second Adam to sin.

I don't say that there isn't a devil or Satan for I don't believe that you can have a power for ultimate good without its opposite. Our lives and our world are made up of opposites; light and dark, happiness and sadness, comfort and

pain, sickness and health, male and female, softness and strength, heat and cold, good and bad. But just as we know that God lives in us, so, I believe can evil - if we give it room. That is why we need to be rigorous in our house cleaning and not leave shady corners untouched.

We all have them; on 11th February, 1627, at Whitehall in London, John Donne gave a sermon before King James 1 on the First Sunday in Lent in which he talked of 'his whispering sins.' I know I have 'whispering sins', and I'm sure you may have too. It's time for us all to clean out all the corners, lift all the rugs and move all the furniture. Our personal inventory needs to be thorough and

honest - because honesty reveals truth. In the Greek, the word for truth is 'aletheia', which means literally, 'unhiddenness', and who hasn't hidden things they didn't want others to find at one time or another?

But this is not supposed to bring us all into the depths of despair as we contemplate the enormity of the task, because we don't have to do it on our own. If we ask God to help it becomes so easy. You see that what we are doing when we let our own egos get in the way is that we block the path for God to help us. Ego can stand for 'edging God out' - and that is only going to make our lives a whole lot harder.

Either God is everything or He is nothing, and if He is everything, then He can help us with everything - including the messy business of cleaning house, which is an important task for Lent.

Just before my class at Theological College in Salisbury was ordained, we were offered the opportunity for confession. I accepted, as I didn't want to go into Holy Orders with what I called 'a dirty surplice.' I confessed everything I could think of - some of which was embarrassing and very personal, but I was glad to be rid of it. The point was that I had lay down my burden at the foot of the Cross and accept God's grace and mercy in the

sacrifice of Jesus. How can we enjoy the triumph of Easter morning if we have held something back? Now is the time for release, now is the time to get rid of all the kak in your life - I can translate that from the Afrikaans if you like, but I suspect you get the gist.

Some of us, including me in the past, will feel that it's too much to do, or that we're not worthy of God's love and grace. That's a common mistake, and one which my 100 year old mother-in-law still carries around with her. Despite Sheila and I repeatedly telling her that she can't earn her way into heaven and that accepting the forgiveness that Jesus offers is all that is required, she clings to her heavy burden and struggles around like the

ghost of Jacob Marley with all his chains. It's so sad. Even so, I'm sure that Jesus will be more than ready to take her to heaven when it's time to call her home. She just hasn't realized how simple the gospel is - rather like my father who felt that it was an intellectual task to understand. How we often forget that Jesus asked us to 'be as little children'!

If a child can understand the gospel, surely we can too?

Briefly, then, to turn once more to Jesus in the desert, preparing himself for his ministry and rooting out all the surreptitious, lurking, cankerous thoughts implanted in his mind by the devil, can we not join him on this journey

as we go through our own Lent and let the Spirit work in us too? For the Spirit promises to bring us 'into all truth' by stripping away the insulation and barriers which have separated us from living contact with reality, the reality of God, of God's world, and our true selves. And that's going to call for 100% commitment and honesty on our part; do we have the courage?