



GRAY'S
INN

Sermon preached in Chapel on March 9th 2020

Lessons: Hosea 6: 1-6 & Matthew 4: 1-11

Product, Personality, and Power

This season of Lent has always been a time for self-examination. How am I doing? In my life, with my family and friends, in my job, in my Christian faith? And more than that, what am I founding my life on? What are the fundamentals on which I'm basing how I live, the decisions I make, the directions I take? We will come back to fundamentals at the end.

At the beginning of his public ministry Jesus faced such questions. We know little of his earlier life. There's a big gap between the Nativity Stories and his coming to the River Jordan, aged about thirty, to be baptised by John. It's there that he realises, or at least has his vocation confirmed, that he is "The Special One". But unlike Jose Mourinho he doesn't claim it for himself, it is announced by others. He is the one for whom they have been waiting. He is the Messiah.

But what kind of Messiah? That's the question. Does he take the easy way or the difficult, perhaps painful way? His way, or God's way? The Old Testament sometimes saw the Messiah as a powerful warrior, an uncompromising judge. But is also pictured one who would be God's servant, and even a suffering servant.

And it's at this point that the devil takes advantage of Jesus' vulnerability and drives him into the wilderness. There he faces the three temptations: to turn stones into bread, to throw himself off the pinnacle of the Temple and float safely down, or to take power in the only way that the devil knows how.

The first temptation was to turn stones into bread. Jesus refuses, not because he is turning his back on those who need bread to eat, then and now, but because he will not become a cheap miracle-worker. And more than that, he refuses to limit the activity of God to meeting immediate and obvious needs. We do not live by bread alone.

This is a temptation to be primarily concerned with Products. We live in a world where the main activity is making things, and then consuming them. Or increasingly making money to buy them. We live in a world of products. where success is measured by productivity.

But man (or indeed, woman) does not live by bread alone. Each of us is a beautiful and vulnerable person created by God, and we do no justice to ourselves or others if we use all

of that simply to become a consumer, a consumer of bread, a consumer of any other product which the advertisers tell us we can no longer live without. We do not live by bread alone.

If the first temptation is about Products, the second is about Personality. Become a star, says the devil to Jesus. Throw yourself off this pinnacle of the Temple. Thrill the people with your miraculous escape. Hit the headlines, not the ground. Become a “personality”.

And again we know only too well about living in a world where the cult of personality reigns. It’s a universe created by Hello! and OK magazines, where Kylie and Adele are so well-known that they no longer need surnames, where whole TV programmes feature people who are famous just for being famous, where the line between the real world and what’s happening to a character in a soap opera has almost disappeared, and where people can worry more about the couples on Love Island than their own relationships. The cult of personality treats people in the end as objects, lifted up and then dropped right down according to the needs of others. Famous today, forgotten tomorrow.

Product, Personality... and Power. Look, says the devil to Jesus. you’re a good bloke, you’ve got some good ideas, and we’d all like to see these kind of things come about. But you know, and I know, that the world isn’t like that. What I can offer you is real power, power to control this world in the only way that this world can recognize. Go your way, and you risk everything, even yourself. Come my way, and we’ll force our way through.

We live in a world where we rightly take pride in democracy and human rights, but prefer not to ask too many questions as to who actually holds the real power. For people in many other parts of the world it is only too obvious what makes them powerless, the elites within their own societies, the more powerful nations like our own who make the rules, great trans-national companies who wield more power than many nation states.

In rejecting this temptation Jesus affirms that power belongs not to the devil but to God, and that power is to be exercised not in domination and control, but in humility and service, not to belittle and dehumanise others but to lift them up as God has lifted us up. To worship the Lord your God, and to serve only him, is also to make a radical choice as to how we exercise our own power in this world.

So Jesus sets out on his public ministry, having chosen the risky way that can lead to failure, and which will lead, for him, to the Cross. Let me try, in the final part of this sermon, to apply something of this to us personally, and also the role that religion can play in our world.

First, for us personally. Lent is a time to ask ourselves, how am I living this out day by day? Am I just caught up in the world of Product, Personality and Power? Or am I doing something to embody the alternative, to show the way of Jesus, to follow the way of reconciliation and service, and so help to bring about a world in which everyone can belong?

And if Lent issues that challenge it also offers us ways of turning round (that's what "repentance" means), seeking forgiveness, starting afresh. The journey through Lent to Holy Week can be the place where we open ourselves once again to this forgiving, healing, love of God.

And I also apply all of this to the world of faith. Because too often religion has been tempted, indeed has given way to the temptation, to choose the easier path which the devil offered and which Jesus rejected. Nowhere is that better seen than in what we call religious fundamentalism, where Product / Personality / and Power are the dominating features, instead of the way that Jesus chose, the way of humility and service, the way of commitment and truth. Fundamentalism controls and manipulates people. Jesus seeks to set us free.

But, as this really is my final thought, and perhaps a somewhat controversial one... Let's realise that fundamentalism is not just a religious diversion, it's increasingly found in our secular culture, where atheism tries to claim that it must now have power over everyone, it alone can claim to be neutral and declare itself as normative. It's a form of fundamentalism that now permeates the BBC, DfID, and the latest Humanist attacks on Church schools. Secularism has learnt only too well from religion how to exercise power to the exclusion of others.

Christian liberalism, which I believe is much closer to what Jesus embraced in the wilderness, rejects both religious and secular fundamentalism. It calls us forward, it calls for real commitment to God and neighbour, it calls us to be true to ourselves without rejecting the Other, it offers no simple certainty, but only, as Jesus found, even on the Cross, it offers the assurance that God goes with us on the journey, and will be there at its End.