



First Sunday of Lent  
Sunday 13 March 2011

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## Out of the Depths

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

**Readings: Genesis 2.15-17, 3.1-7; Matthew 4.1-11**

Last week the members of our clergy from our chapter met with the Bishop of London for breakfast. We do it once a year, eat breakfast and then he fields any questions we may have. He does it brilliantly and has a way of weaving together all our difference with a wonderful bonhomie. During one of his monologues he was talking about the General Synod, the governing body of the Church of England, he said that he himself had never belonged to any of the factions or clubs of synod but rather tried to follow Paul's teaching that and tried to become "all things to all people." For example he said "When I go to one of London's evangelical parishes I do their thing, I am very cool... and," he said with a twinkle "when I go to St Martin-in-the-Fields I am very wicked." Everyone of course roared with laughter, including us from St Martin-in-the-Fields. But why "wicked?" I suppose it's because St Martin's does have this reputation among some of being outside the box, we would say on the edge, some of our critics may think beyond the pale. In our mission statement we focus on the idea of being an open and inclusive church that enables people to question for themselves. In the Mission Action Plan we talk about being committed to an inclusive vision of God's kingdom where all are welcome irrespective of the elements that make up the range of human diversity, including age, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, wealth or ability. We talk about a church seeking "to live paradox creatively", a church "living the questions." To some this may sound like a free for all. But for others this is the faith for which we really, really, hunger: a faith broad enough to respond to the paradoxes of our world. Faith is not something which fell down from the sky or which can be simply decanted from the larger bottle to the smaller one, it is much more subversive.

How can we believe in God for example, who, we are told, counts the hairs of our head, and face the tragic devastation of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan? The loss and human destruction is both mind and heart blowing. "Out of the depths I cried to you O Lord."

As the news moves on into other news it is difficult not to feel overwhelmed by the suffering of our world: we learn the Ivory Coast is on the brink of a blood bath and in Libya Gaddafi and his supporters are dropping bombs and missiles on their own people. Faith if it is to have any meaning must be wrestled with, wrestled with as it has been for two thousand years. The cross of Christ is not a thing of the past. It has not lost its power. The suffering of our world still cries out for redress from every corner. And formulaic religion and many of the preoccupations of the institutional church simply do not fit our questioning. "Out of the depths I cry to you O Lord. O Lord hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! If you Lord, should mark iniquities, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you."

This is our faith, the struggle of incarnation, the struggle to find God in the depths of our real lives. As WB Yeats wrote:

Love has pitched his mansion in  
The place of excrement;  
For nothing can be sole or whole  
That has not been rent.

In our Gospel for today we see Christ involved in that deep struggle of becoming, a tearing away from the false. Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Notice he is

led by the Spirit, the Spirit does not bypass or avoid the struggle and temptation rather it leads him into it, into the crucible of doubt. Here is the place where faith will be forged, not in passive acceptance but in adversity. If we look at our own lives we will see too that often our discoveries of faith are made at those moments in our lives where we went into the unknown and feared losing everything. Jesus' fasting in the wilderness is a stripping down, literally a self-emptying. And we who are called to be his followers also take the risk of being overwhelmed.

Jesus is confronted by three temptations. The temptation to turn stone into pieces of bread; the second to jump from the pinnacle of the temple to prove how the angels will protect him and the third from the top of the mountain he is promised all the kingdoms of the earth if he falls down and worships Satan. Dostoyevsky in his novel *The Brothers Karamazov* uses these temptations in the most extraordinary set piece of religious debate entitled *The Grand Inquisitor*. It is a debate I have never forgotten because it seems central to our understanding of faith. In the story Jesus stands before the Grand Inquisitor who accuses him and threatens him with death. "Why has Jesus," the Inquisitor demands "bound the intolerable burden of freedom upon humanity?" "How dare he and his Father profess their eternal love for men and women while dangling before their eyes impossible ideals?" Far better that Jesus offer the people something real tangible, material and graspable, what they clamour for most - the bread of the earth not the bread of heaven. "Look at these stones in the burning hot wilderness. Turn them into loaves of bread and people will go trotting after you like a flock of sheep grateful and obedient. What does Jesus offer instead? "Nothing has ever been more feared and unendurable to men and woman and society than freedom," says the Inquisitor. The truth is that human beings cannot bear too much freedom. They cannot live questions, much better to surrender their liberty to a ruler who will tell them what to believe and what the truth is. The Inquisitor says the church must abandon the way of freedom and the Spirit of Christ, instead the church must console its people with the very temptations that Jesus rejected - with miracle, mystery and authority. The promise that somehow the faithful will get what they want, that God's angels will protect them, and the church will seduce them with position, authority and power. The institution will be the life boat for the chosen few while the others drown. This is the temptation Christ rejects but the freedom he chooses will lead to the cross.

True freedom, the freedom of the Spirit of God continues to threaten us. Freedom has two faces, it can be both gift and curse, it can be both the way to fulfilment and the way to undoing. That is always freedom's risk. We do not need to look very far both in church and state to see this in practice. Toe the line, keep everything in its place, submit to ruling dominant authority, do not question and everything will be provided both here on earth and also a ticket for heaven. At the moment more than ever we are witnessing the clash of these two positions. Look at Egypt and Libya, the longing to become, the longing and the energy and the hope of freedom; a freedom unshackled from all the injustices and deceits of tyranny. Look at the fear and terror of that freedom, the repression of the dictator resorting to violence. And we the western world hover in the background sensing that the winds of change can bring a new justice and hope and yet fearful too, better the devil you know than the risk of a freedom that cannot be contained or trusted. But this dialectic is not only at work out there in the world it is also at work in our own lives. Think of your own life, the negative voice that we sometimes assume to be God's voice, judging our failure, filling us with fear, telling us that we have to hold on, control, grasp, that the future is to be feared, that we can never be the beloved of God.

Dostoyevsky grasped, in the pain and struggle of his own life, that the God, revealed in the total poverty of Christ, must be the source of true freedom, not the obstacle to it. Christ in the wilderness shows clearly that he does not want us to put our faith in materialism, angels or magic, he does not want the church to fall back on stiff, intransigent authority. The message of Jesus Christ is that God is not the adversary, the superpower, the dictator, promising only to reward those who toe the party line and punish all adversaries. The message is something completely different, a God who is also out there, with us on the edge, a God whose greatest demands are love and mercy. Julian of

Norwich who will be leading many of us through Lent writes: “Some of us believe that God is almighty and may do everything; and that he is wise and can do everything; but that he is all love and will do everything there we draw back. As I see it this ignorance is the greatest of all hindrances to God’s lovers.”

This is the God who meets us in the wilderness not as tyrant and judge but as the one who hears the cry of his people and longs to free them. Psalm 130 is the psalm which will be our theme for this season of Lent. “Out of the depths I cry to you O Lord, Lord hear my voice.” The cry of the psalmist becomes the cry of God himself in Jesus Christ. It is a psalm which leads both to the real agony of the cross but also to the hope and life beyond our fears. It is the cry of someone longing for God and God’s longing for us. During Lent we will be exploring this psalm in our theme out of the depths and in the 6.30 services members of our congregation will reflect on this cry out of the depths of their own life and experience. In Passion and Holy Week a cross will be installed above this altar entitled “Victim No Resurrection”. And speakers will speak about the violence of a world still longing for freedom, resurrection and peace.

The vision of the cross both as the place of pain but also of life and hope is expressed with such clarity by Julian of Norwich with her practical wisdom and I want to end with words from her revelation which we would do well to carry with us:

“You will not be overcome was said very distinctly and firmly to give us confidence and comfort for whatever troubles may come. He did not say ‘You will never have a rough passage, you will never be over strained, you will never be uncomfortable,’ but he did say ‘you will never be overcome.’ God wants us to pay attention to these words, so as to trust him always with strong confidence, through thick and thin. For he loves us and delights in us; so he wills that we should love and delight in him in return, and trust in him with all our strength. So all will be well. All manner of things will be well.”