

A sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

8am Linton, 10 am Horseheath 18th February 2018

'Testing times'

Lent 1B

(1 Peter 3.18-22, Psalm 25.1-10) Mark 1.9-15

I'm a great admirer of the present Pope – in a particular, his emphasis on mercy as the characteristic which should define the Church, his seeing the person in front of him before he sees the rules and dogmas, the way in which he looks at issues not from the point of view of the established, the powerful or the comfortably off, but from the point of view of those on the margins and in poverty, and finally his courage and outspokenness in challenging the ways in which some of the powers-that-be in the Vatican have got stuck in rigid thinking and self-serving attitudes. This is why you may sometimes hear me praying for the Pope in the intercessions – not because I'm a crypto-Roman Catholic, but because I know Pope Francis faces a great deal of opposition from within his own church and a backlash within its bureaucracy and from some of its

bishops, and I would like to invite you to pray with me that God will protect and sustain his ministry long enough to establish mercy as the overriding characteristic of what is – after all – the greatest and most influential of the Christian Communion in the world.

But, admirer as I am of Pope Francis, I don't agree with everything he says or does, and today I'd like to reflect on just one comment he made a short while ago - that we should re-express how we say the Lord's Prayer and stop praying 'Lead us not into Temptation' because, as he said, 'God never leads us into temptation'.

Well, we know what he means – God shouldn't be blamed for our own weaknesses and stupid choices – but today's Gospel reading does say something else about temptation: It says that after the sublime moment of Jesus' baptism, that blessed Holy Spirit who had descended on him like a dove '*immediately drove him out into the wilderness*' where he was tempted by Satan. This is Mark's account of what happened. St Matthew's account doesn't have that strong word '*drove*' – but it says the Holy Spirit '*led*' Jesus into the wilderness precisely *to* be tempted by the devil. Either

way it's expressed, it reminds us not to be misled by that gentle image of the dove descending on Jesus when he was baptised: the Holy Spirit does bless, console, heal and give peace – but he can also be very forceful, and lead us into troublous times. So, when we ask for the Holy Spirit in our lives, we should be aware what we may be asking for!

But Christians do, nevertheless, ask for the Holy Spirit – for an increase of the Spirit's work - in their lives. It's right that we should do so. How else is the world to know God's consolation, blessing, healing and peace, if the Spirit isn't allowed in – nay, prayed for earnestly? But testing and difficulty are also part of the package, part of the answer to that prayer.

When people – especially adults – are going to be baptised or confirmed I try to remember to warn them beforehand; if they're choosing for themselves this momentous step of faith, they shouldn't be surprised if, soon after the elation of having made it, something unexpected happens which will really test the faith and commitment they've expressed. I think it's good to tell people that this may happen, because, as they say, 'forewarned is forearmed'. I've seen this pattern, of

commitment followed by testing, happen quite a lot in my ministry – most shockingly when a lady who had been confirmed the previous week, heard the news of her grandson's death in a road accident as she was actually sitting in church on the following Sunday morning. Other times, of course, the test of faith has taken a less horrible and tragic form, but has been none the less very real, and sometimes has led to the person's falling away from God and the church very quickly after they had so enthusiastically embraced the faith for themselves. It could be something like a falling-out with someone in the church community – the painful experience that they've joined a body made up of prickly sinners – which tests a new Christian's faith, and can lead them to leave it, very fast.

What are we to say about things like this? Mere coincidences? After all, bad things happen to people randomly at all sorts of times: sometimes it might happen by chance that one of those things occurs very soon after a big spiritual step...Or is there something more happening? Is there a pattern we can see in the Gospel account of Jesus' baptism, followed immediately by his testing.

Surely we don't want to say that God *sends* a disaster like a young man's death to test someone? And we don't blame God, do we, for the failings of his community, which so often tempt people to throw the whole lot over? In this, my sympathies are with Pope Francis: I don't think the Lord actively sends such things 'to try us'. But he allows them. He *may* even put us in the position where we're more likely to suffer them.

If God *allows* tests and trials, is it actually the devil – Satan, the enemy of our souls – who inflicts them? That's what the story of Jesus, tested in the wilderness, seems to imply; it's also an idea which is there in the Job. 'Satan' is our Accuser – the one who tests us out, in order to unmask our weaknesses. This is a thought which resonates with many Christians – the sense that there's a conscious spiritual force, ranged against us, who would like to destroy our faith, and who's very cunning about it. Having this sense that there's a battle on can be helpful, in encouraging you to seek God's help in resisting and standing firm: as it says in the Baptism service, '*Fight valiantly as a disciple of Christ against sin, the world and the devil, and remain faithful to Christ to the end of your life.*' I wouldn't be inclined to throw this idea out, at all. However, I do know that

other Christians nowadays find it hard to believe literally in a personal devil, or in actual evil spirits; it may seem preferable to treat them as a mythological way of describing psychological realities, and patterns of experience which we all recognise. But what I'm trying to say is this - that however we explain it, there are very real tests we face in life – tests not just of our will-power, but of our faith and faithfulness itself. And often they crop up after 'spiritual high points'. What the Gospel story implies is that, even if God doesn't inflict the actual tests himself, he may put us in places where they can happen. Quite often people describe being led into what feels like a wilderness in their interior life, maybe for a long time. God certainly doesn't protect us from the '*slings and arrows of outrageous fortune*'; indeed, he positively calls us to follow our Saviour on the way of the cross.

So – what of the prayer, 'lead us not into temptation'? I hope it's clear by now that it isn't primarily about what we might call everyday, 'surface' temptations. God isn't going to lead you into a sweet shop if you're on a diet, but nor is he going to stop you from making bad choices about where you go, unless you positively ask him for help (which is a good thing to do, and a realistic

acknowledgement of your own frailty). Still - what we're talking about here isn't that kind of temptation.

No, we're talking about the temptation, or the testing, which is expressed by the New Testament word '*peirasmos*', which means something much more than everyday tests of our will-power. It describes a time of trial such as might come upon us in apocalyptic conditions – the sifting of human souls by circumstances which show if they choose goodness over evil when terror is at hand. It describes the kind of testing which Jesus faced in the Garden of Gethsemane, when his drops of sweat fell like blood as he chose his Father's will over any possibility of escape. It describes, in short, any situation in which *who we are* deep down hangs in the balance – and that, of course, was the nature of the tests Jesus faced in the wilderness, as recounted by Matthew and Luke.

Our Lord himself spoke of the danger of 'gaining the world but losing our souls': you or I might ruefully think that it wouldn't take such a *very* great test to make us choose the world rather than our souls – that is to say, rather than that deep orientation towards God which

we want to hang on to, but which sometimes seems so extremely fragile.

All our Lenten resistance of chocolates, alcohol, or too much use of our smartphones, may in some sense be a practice, a muscle toning exercise, for hanging on faithfully when real, existential tests come. But, in the end, they're no substitute for the heartfelt prayer, 'lead us not into temptation'. What it surely means is, 'do not let us be tested more than we can bear; and when such testing times as we do face threaten to overwhelm us, O Lord, come to our aid. Our strength alone is not enough. In St Francis' words, '*You are our guardian and defender. You are courage, you are our haven and our hope. You are our faith, our great consolation. You are our eternal life, great and wonderful Lord, God almighty, merciful Saviour.*'

The good news of our merciful Saviour was voiced by Paul, who suffered so much. Writing to the Corinthians he said this, from his own experience: '*God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.*' (1 Corinthians 10.13).

Thanks be to God.

