

Lent Sermon Series 2014

1st Sunday in Lent, 9th March

St Mary's Kidlington, 8am

Dr Judith Ryder on *What are we doing when we pray?*

So we come to the first Sunday of Lent.

When I first found out I was going to be preaching this morning, I was labouring under two misapprehensions.

The first was that my first sermon – which this is – was going to be very low key – the early service, not many people around, a nice gentle start. I didn't know it was going to be the first in a series of themed Lent sermons, publicised around the parish and discussed at Lent groups during the week.

In case anyone doesn't know about this, this is probably a good moment to explain about it. During Lent, the sermons in the parish are all going to be around the theme of *Ways of Praying*. Felicity has produced a booklet to accompany it – if you haven't got a copy yet, there should be some available at the back of the church. There will then be Lent groups during the week, reflecting on the sermons. The sermons will also be available on the parish website and in printed copies.

This week's theme is 'What are we doing when we pray'?

And this brings me to my second misapprehension. When I first got the date for preaching, I checked quickly what the readings would be. When I saw it was Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, I thought this would connect very easily with the theme I'd also been given. I got thinking along the lines of deserts/wildernesses & prayer – there is a lot that can be said about that, obviously, lots of strong traditional themes and ideas about prayer and meditation, seeking God in silence – all good themes, which I imagine will be talked about in other sermons. I had built up in my mind quite an idea of a sermon along those lines.

But then I sat down to prepare properly, and had a proper look at the readings. The problem I discovered was that this week's gospel doesn't actually say anything about prayer. I checked the story in the other gospels but they don't mention prayer either. Luke and Matthew simply talk about Jesus fasting for 40 days, and unsurprisingly being hungry by the end – and Mark doesn't even mention the fasting.

So I was left with a dilemma – I wanted to preach from the set readings, but I also wanted to use them to reflect on the theme for the day – but the readings didn't actually say anything directly about prayer.

Indirectly, however, they probably say something absolutely essential about what we are doing when we pray – but I will come to that in a little while.

First I want to think a bit about not what *isn't* mentioned in the readings, but what *is*. The readings are quite clearly connected by theme. In the Genesis reading, we have the story of Adam and Eve giving in to temptation. In the gospel reading, we have the story of Jesus *not* giving in to temptation, but showing total obedience to God's will. In Romans, Paul, as so often, joins the dots, in case we had missed the point: where Adam went wrong, Jesus went right: 'as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men'. Paul would have had in mind much more than Jesus' temptation in the wilderness – but what happened in Jesus' resistance to temptation then gave the shape to his entire ministry and passion.

So Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is not an edifying story about a holy man praying and fasting and choosing a virtuous path. It is a story of cosmic significance, of the Son of God defeating the forces of evil, and so restoring humanity to grace. It's hardly surprising if it can't be used very easily just to talk about the nature of prayer.

But there are some aspects of the story which I think could be very useful in thinking about what we are doing when we pray. Clearly, prayer is a vast subject, and there are many different ways of praying: formal ways, informal ways, corporate and individual, worship, meditation, intercession, thanksgiving, desperation – but this story points to an absolute fundamental foundation of prayer, without which we cannot even start.

A very striking part of the temptation story, found in all three accounts, is the role of the Spirit. As we have heard in the gospel today, Matthew says: 'Jesus was *led up by the Spirit* into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil'. Luke describes Jesus as returning full of the Holy Spirit from Jordan (his baptism), and then he was '*led by the Spirit* for forty days in the wilderness'. Mark is more vivid about it: 'The Spirit immediately *drove* him out into the wilderness'. Jesus was following the promptings of the Spirit; the Spirit led or drove him into the wilderness, as part of his divine vocation, to be tempted and then to return to embark on his life's mission.

As Christians, we are all called to follow Christ's example, and there is much theology, spirituality, and active service built on the imitation of Christ. But we are also clearly not Christ – we follow his example in our own particular circumstances, our call is specific to ourselves. But in this, the essential transferable message which seems to come from the temptation story is that the prompting of the Spirit always comes first – faithful prayer and faithful action follows from it.

Everything we try to do in prayer is a response, not an effort on our part aimed at producing a desired spiritual effect. In this sense, we are not *doing* anything – we are responding to what is already being done, accepting an invitation. This does not mean passivity, but an awareness of the true order of things. We are opening ourselves to working *with* God's grace, not against it, and in order to do so we are provided with opportunity, through prayer and through other means, to discern God's grace, God's call.

The temptation story itself points to some of the other means by which we can discern God's grace and God's call. One of them is quite obvious – Jesus himself responds to the temptations put to him with references to Scripture. But something that might go unnoticed is that God sends other reassurances to Jesus. When – or if (this may well depend on our tradition) – we talk about 'discerning the spirits', I suspect we are likely to think more in terms of identifying evil temptations. But once Jesus has responded to those temptations, Matthew and Mark both describe angels coming to minister to him. This is something that has long had great resonance for me, for some reason. What I would draw from it is that the ability to discern the angels – to have confidence when God sends us reassurances and support in whatever form – is a gift we can receive from God, and something that prayer can help us grow in.

Finally, I suspect that actually one of the things many of us do with regard to prayer – this certainly applies to me, so here I am preaching particularly to myself – is procrastinate: we know we should pray, we know it is helpful, we know life works better when we find time in particular for regular prayer – but we put it off. Lent can be looked at as an encouragement to stop this procrastination. It is a God-given reminder that the invitation is there. And this Lent, we have a particular gift in that as a parish we have this programme centred on prayer – somewhere, in all this, if we accept the invitation, there will be angels at work offering us reassurance and support. With God's grace, we can all grow through prayer in the process leading us once again to Easter.

Judith Ryder
9th March 2014