

You will have known that story of Jesus's temptations in the wilderness for a very long time. But what about the church's temptations in the wilderness? Have you come across that story yet?

You may think I'm exaggerating, talking about being in the wilderness, but that's how it can feel sometimes, at least to people of my generation. We like to tell nostalgic stories about a Golden Age, when churches supposedly were full, even though nostalgia isn't what it used to be.

Admittedly some of those stories have grown in the telling and they wouldn't survive research into church records, but they do give voice to our sense of loss. Many of us have been finding the going hard, just like people in a desert. There are times when we aren't sure of the way. Familiar landmarks have disappeared, and we've seen friends give up and fall by the wayside. And, not surprisingly, that is when the church hears voices, and they are remarkably like the voices Jesus heard.

"If you are the church of God", says the first voice, "then care about people in a big way. Think how you would earn their gratitude and their loyalty. So, turn stones into bread, feed the hungry, house the homeless, shelter the refugees, lobby the government, don't just moan about injustice, do something about it."

But if the church has its wits about it, it will say: "Too true! God help the church which does not care about people, because to walk by on the other side is to dishonour God and go along with the abuse of his children. But God also help the church which thinks that when it has done all that, it has fulfilled its purpose. The gospel has been entrusted to our care. There are things to be said as well as things to be done. Humankind cannot live on bread alone."

And then a second tempting voice is heard. And this is where I'm changing the order of the temptations, which is what Matthew did in his gospel, and Matthew I believe was right, because the temptation Luke puts second provides a more dramatic climax to the whole story if it comes last. So, with apologies to Luke, what the church hears next is this: "If you are the church of God, go out on a limb. Throw yourself down. Impress people. Do something spectacular. Draw attention to yourself. Make a noise about it. And don't worry – God will pick up the pieces, whatever you decide to do."

But if the church has its wits about it, it will sense danger here. "Yes", it will say, "ours is a revolutionary faith. And when you have a revolution things are likely to get noisy. But God help the church which thinks that just by making a noise it is helping to bring about a revolution. And God help the church which expects God to underwrite its own ideas. Our only concern must be with what God is asking of us, because this is not our mission but his. You are not to put the Lord your God to the test."

And then comes the third temptation, and it comes to us, as it came to our Lord, on a mountain top. Now you can stand on the summit of Snowdon or Scafell Pike or Ben Nevis and the guide book will tell you how many counties you should be able to see from there once it stops raining. But if you have the imagination for it you will be able to see all the kingdoms of the world in their glory.

And this is where the gloves come off, because instead of the gradual approach, sowing doubts, and saying, "If you are the church of God . . ." the tempter wades straight in with the hard sell. "All this", he says, "all you see from the mountain top, could be yours. Just think how attractive and successful you could be, and what a power for good, if only you went about things in the right way. But you will need more power and influence than you have just now, and you must have the right people on your side, and you'll have to learn the right techniques as well. Big business didn't become big just by praying for growth and hoping something would turn up. It's up to you and you must make it happen.

"So you will need a strategy, and of course a mission statement, and you must learn how to deploy your resources, and how to package and market and sell your product, and to do that you will need a vibrant, dynamic, multi-talented sales staff, excited and passionate about their task, able to inspire and motivate others, and to work all hours to achieve it."

And, just to interrupt the tempter in full flow for a moment, if you think I'm pulling your leg with all this jargon, just read the advertisements for clergy appointments in the Church Times. But that's by the way, and we must let the hard sell continue, because the tempter goes on to say:

"And last but not least you really must improve your image, not for your own sake, of course, but for the sake of all those people out there, your consumers, who would love to join your organisation. Because believe me, those people out there are persuadable, as long as you go about it in the right way."

And if the church has it wits about it, which on recent evidence is not very often, it will reply: "There is a deep attractiveness about our Lord and about the Christian faith which should be visible and tangible, something to be experienced, within the Christian community, but this has nothing to do with more power or the right strategy or newer techniques or slicker management or the creation of a better image. A church which can do all those things may indeed see some increase in the number of its consumers, as you would like us to call them, but it will not have one scrap of real authority to proclaim the gospel. God help any church which thinks it all depends on them, and that they must make it happen. You shall do homage to the Lord your God and worship him alone."

All the temptations which came to Jesus in the wilderness had this in common, that he was being tempted to avoid the cross and to take the easy way. And, if you think about it, that is precisely what the church's temptations have in common. We are being tempted to take the easy way.

I've been reading Roly's books recently about clowning, and I was very drawn to his description of a clown. A clown, he said, is a "vulnerable lover". And that is a description I have come to covet for my church – that it should be a vulnerable lover.

But what might that mean? Just two brief thoughts about it in closing.

First, the church can speak as eloquently as it likes about such things as love and forgiveness and compassion and reconciliation and justice and all the rest of it, but why on earth should anyone believe us? Why should they take our word for it, unless they can actually see the evidence for such things in the life of the Christian community and of its members?

The church is in real danger when it becomes like the man who was taken to court by the hotel he stayed in because, they said, he had returned to the hotel late one night, very drunk, and had then smoked in bed and set fire to the bedclothes. And in his own defence he said, first, that he had not been drunk when he arrived back at the hotel and, secondly, that the bed was already on fire when he got into it.

And a church which is at odds with itself, judgemental towards others, unwelcoming, ungenerous, unwilling to love to the point where it risks getting hurt, becomes no more believable than that man in the witness box. The gospel of the all-embracing love of God will never sound convincing coming from a church like that.

Secondly, perhaps you know the name Giles Fraser. He was the canon of St Paul's who resigned over their handling of the banking protests which were centred on the cathedral a few years ago, and for some months he was out of a job until they found him a parish south of the river in the Southwark diocese, a parish apparently bristling with huge social and economic problems. But where do you start, faced with all that? Giles Fraser found it a daunting prospect but, he said, "I'll begin by saying my prayers and making friends." And that is the simple secret at the heart of all the church's work.

And when I say "simple", I mean it. But easy? No, never in a million years! It will take all the love, all the courage, all the willingness to make fools of ourselves, all the knowledge, all the imagination we can bring to it, and then some. Not easy, but it is simple. It only becomes complicated because we make it so, God forgive us! And we've complicated it because we've panicked, and we are in a desperate hurry. We forget what one of the old French saints said: "He who is in a hurry delays the things of God". And the reason we are in a hurry is because we have seen the statistics, and they frighten us, and our concern now is with bums on seats, money in plates and keeping the show on the road. No wonder we fall for the temptation to go for the quick and easy solution.

But, this is where we are, and it is in this situation that the church is called to be a vulnerable lover. The trouble is, loving God and being open to God, and open to the truth of God, can hurt. And loving people, and being open to people, with the risk of being let down and even betrayed, can hurt. It is, in a sense, the way of the cross. But God can use such love to change the world.