



Pulpits and Temptations – watching your step

For those of you who are new to St James's, the sight of the preacher in the pulpit is probably not unusual.

For those of you who have been coming to St James's for some time, I'm reliably informed that the preacher has not preached from up here in the pulpit for at least 25 years.

'So, what am I doing up here?' I hear you ask....

I could make something up. I'm illustrating the gospel we've just heard and, at some point, I will launch myself over the front of the pulpit to see if the angels catch me. Or, I'm up here, in a high place, being shown all the kingdoms of the world and being tempted to over-reach the power of a public speaker.

But, in fact, I'm doing it for a dare.

As many of you know, we run a course here, covering all different aspects of Christian faith, called *Camino*. We are about half way through this year's course and this year's group is...what shall I say...spirited!

We give homework in between sessions, which ranges from reading something, to trying different ways of praying, to finding contemporary stories in the news. This week's homework was a challenge to the group to sit somewhere different from where they usually sit in church. This we have discovered over the years is the most unpopular of challenges. Most people really don't like it and it helps to reveal what creatures of habit we are and how we like things to stay as we like them. But today, the members of the Camino group should be sitting somewhere different to get a different view, shake it up a bit and see what they think of it.

Not unreasonably, this year, the group asked me if I was going to do the same. And so, in the interests of joining in, I am not so much sitting somewhere else as breaking a bit of a taboo...by using the pulpit for the sermon, which hasn't been used for years. We do use it often for large carol services, for concerts, for memorial services sometimes and so it does get a fair bit of use. But, as the song goes, never on a Sunday.

But now that I'm up here and you know it's for a bet, I thought I'd make the most of it and talk about the pulpit in the context of today's gospel and the beginning of this most solemn season of Lent.

The season of Lent which began on Wednesday is a chance to reflect on our faith both as individuals and together. The way a church is laid out (its architecture and furniture) is a statement of spiritual priorities and principles. We absorb this, consciously or otherwise, and we can get simply too comfortable, too familiar with the repetition of what we know and what we see.

We speak often here of the clear glass; a distinctive feature of Christopher Wren's churches so the light of Reason, Wren thought, floods in. And this church, built in 1684, is a post Reformation church; there are no little side chapels in which to say a private mass. The altar is decorated richly by the carvings by Grinling Gibbons which illustrates that Communion (or Eucharist) is valued and important to the gathered community. And here is a pulpit, originally much higher than this...originally level with the gallery, to illustrate the fact that the Word of God is equally important. Scripture and its impact on the lives of faithful people is held alongside the Eucharist; equal in stature, equal in importance. This pulpit was about accessibility of the word of God to the people in their own language.

Christopher Wren wrote himself about the churches he built....

The Churches (therefore) must be large; but still, in our reformed Religion, it should seem vain to make a Parish-church larger, than that all who are present can both hear and see.

He wanted to build a church where everyone could

hear the Service, and both to hear distinctly, and see the Preacher. I endeavoured to effect this, in building the Parish Church of St. James's, Westminster.

This particular pulpit, which has been here since 1862, is lower than the original, and shows an

apostle on each of the panels. So, when the congregation's concentration wanders, there are *aides memoires*, to help them remember the stories and characters of their faith.

I imagine that the reason my predecessors stopped using the pulpit, all those years ago, was because they became aware of, or uncomfortable with, the fact that it wasn't just Scripture that is high and 'lifted up' in a pulpit but it can become the preacher themselves who starts to believe that they are six feet above contradiction. And so, in the spirit of Jesus himself, who sat down to teach (even on a mountain) the sermons are usually given from the floor.

But for the Reformation Christians, making sure that the word of God was honoured was an important way of curbing the power of the clergy, not emphasising it. By translating the Scriptures into German, in Martin Luther's case and into English in John Wycliffe's case, it was plain to everyone what the gospel said; and the preacher could be held to greater account than he had previously.

Last Sunday, at exactly this time, I was in church in Eisenach in the former East Germany exploring the life of the reformer Martin Luther. It's 500 years this year since, as an Augustinian friar in Germany, he wrote out his list of complaints against the corruption of the church in 1517 and sent them to his archbishop who sent them on to the Pope. Luther also published his 95 complaints, allegedly by nailing them to the door of the church where he was. He started a movement across Europe which led to the formation of our church – the Anglican Church.

So, last Sunday, I was in the church where Martin Luther preached. When he preached there, it was a Catholic church; now it's a Lutheran church. And the pulpit is so high, I got a crick in my neck looking up at the preacher, who was a rather gentle man, quietly spoken, with a thoughtful manner.

The thoughtful preacher last week was rather unlike Martin Luther his predecessor: who (as is the case with many, extraordinary change-makers) was a deeply contradictory man, equally full of faith and doubt; equally full of desire to make the church power more accountable at the same time as brooking absolutely no opposition to his own ideas. From his pulpit, he would rage against corruption at the same time as *struggling day and night with the devil*, in the manner of our gospel today. For Luther, born towards the end

of the 15th century, his was a medieval view of evil: personal, powerful, a force that could grip you and fling you into your own private hell. He wrestled with this force, that he saw wreaking havoc in his church and society, causing multiple injustices and he wrestled viscerally and permanently with his own often despairing sense of failure.

Five hundred years later, some cultures and theologies still want to speak of the devil in the way that Martin Luther did. But I'm not going to spend time defending or interpreting a caricature devil running up hills and persuading Jesus to fling himself off or make a bread roll. It seems to me that, in the manner of Martin Luther, the questions asked by this gospel are very deep: the underlying contemporary themes of our own use of power, our capacity for corruption, what we think of authority and where we put our trust.

There is a mismatch between the presence of the devil in the New Testament and the absence of the devil in contemporary Christianity. Not many good books about Satan!

Liberals will say that a focus on an actual person Satan has been highly damaging to certain groups: people with disabilities, people who are gay, people who have fragile mental health, for examples. These groups have, in some cultures and some theologies, been interpreted as indicators of the presence of Satan and I have met many people (some here today) who have had people pray over them trying to cast out the devil from their lives because they are gay or have a physical or mental impairment. It's wicked.

But even the fact that I might say that it's wicked, belies the fact that we need some way of talking about this kind of *diabolos* dynamic; the cycles of accusation we can get stuck in, the reality of deceit in our lives, the wilful turning away that we can find ourselves doing. So we're not just interpreting 'stuff that is wrong in our lives' as an unintentional mistake, or a sign of being unwell or misunderstood. What do we do with the wilful cruelty, the stone heartedness, that starts with a daily casual callousness towards some part of ourselves or towards another person, that can end up in a passing on of the hurts we have endured for years?

It's not been a Christian understanding that there is some kind of 'equal and opposite' force in the world, that is evil, that opposes God. That dualism was declared a heresy. So perhaps the

best way to describe what this gospel is trying to tell us is that we recognise the struggle.

We human beings are often keen to justify ourselves, to explain and shore up the case for why we are living as we are, why we have acted as we have, how we make our choices and decisions. And our lives right now are a curious and inseparable mixture of our own agency and the agency of others; we are both slave and free.

But the satanic presence as set out here in Scripture is a voice, usually internal, that falsely accuses us, which persuades and encourages us to misuse our power, to act violently towards ourselves or others.

Artists often depict Satan not as an ugly creature but as a beautiful well-proportioned attractive creature. In Jacob Epstein's *Michael defeating the Devil*, the devil is a beautiful young man, hardly distinguishable from St Michael.

Thoughtful or liberal churches often have a problem talking about this. We're hesitant in case we lapse into a medieval world view and start to excuse the atrocities of our own societies and time by saying something that absolves us from responsibility (something like 'the devil made me do it').

The Greek of the gospel gives us much food for thought today. If we were Greek speakers, we would have heard that the devil in this gospel doesn't so much drive Jesus or force him into these arguments. The verb used for Satan is "paralambanei", which means he is taking Jesus along with him, a gradual thing, walking beside. Quite a gentle verb!

It's almost as if they amble casually along a precipice; no drama, just suddenly the question comes...and you didn't even know you were on the edge. We all know that life itself can feel like that sometimes – we didn't even know that chaos was so close.

This sense of the haziness of good and evil, the unclarity often about wrong and right, and the ordinariness of the struggle we recognise is reflected in C S Lewis's amazing imaginative conversation between an experienced devil and a rookie new devil in his book *The Screwtape Letters*.

The experienced devil, Screwtape, is writing advice to his nephew

"Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one - the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts,...."

— **C.S. Lewis, The Screwtape Letters**

He gives him advice about how to draw people away from God – to numb them in subtle, often attractive, slow, ordinary ways. No great huge choices between good and evil, but sometimes just becoming more numb to the tumultuous love and grief of which we are capable, and the suffering we see.

Screwtape writes about one man -

"The more often he feels without acting, the less he will be able ever to act, and, in the long run, the less he will be able to feel."

— **C.S. Lewis, The Screwtape Letters**

If this gospel does anything, I hope it serves to de-familiarise us with the patterns of right and wrong, good and bad, giving us clues to the path we set off on at our baptism; that we turn to Christ. This will mean, as far as we can, unchoosing the complicit abuse of whatever power we have, and confronting our addictions; to possessions or the approval of others or whatever is our own 'go-to' test or temptation.

And the pulpit?

Well, those of you who are sailors will know that churches aren't the only places to have pulpits. Boats have them too. The pulpit in a boat is the platform right at the front. It's the place you lean out from in order to drop the anchor more deeply.

May you know where your own pulpits are...the places in your life where you speak from...and may they be places not to abuse the words that we have been given, but places from which to lean out, take a risk, and drop our anchor more deeply into the presence and peace of God. Amen.

Lucy Winkett