

**Sermon at the Eucharist at Holy Trinity
on Sunday 10 March 2019 at 10 am**

Romans 10 v.8b-13

Luke 4 v.1-13

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

How do you regard a wilderness? As a place of danger and of desolation? A place of unspoilt natural beauty, best seen from a tourist landrover? Or a place of quiet retreat to think through the toilsome troubles of life? I might be mistaken, but I doubt if you regard a wilderness as a place of temptation. In our culture, the city is seen as the archetypal place of temptation, a place where avarice and ambition are rewarded, and anything resembling self-giving love is regarded as weakness.

Yet, in the Jewish tradition the wilderness is in part a place of testing, and of temptation. The forty years of wandering in the wilderness was a time when the Jewish people were tested and in the event failed in their faithfulness to God. The forty days spent by Jesus in the wilderness were also a time of testing, and in the event Jesus overcame the temptations and demonstrated his profound faithfulness to God. Jesus makes it clear that he does not seek to satisfy his own material needs, nor to make a miraculous display of his status and power, nor to enter into partnership with the devil for the sake of political authority. In all three of the temptations Jesus answers the devil with quotations from the last book of the Torah, the Book of Deuteronomy, revealing his total obedience to the will of God:

‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone”

‘It is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”

‘It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

Now, in the Jewish tradition the wilderness is not only a place of testing but also a place of visions, visions that reveal the hidden truths which underlie the events of our lives. Jesus encounters the devil, the fallen angel, a creature who, like all angels, appears in visions and dreams to reveal the true nature of things. Jesus' visionary meeting with Satan reveals a reality that is deeper than what appears on the surface. At this beginning of his ministry, Jesus makes the journey that no-one has made before, through the wilderness and into the Promised Land. And then, having forged a path through the desert of sin, he turns around and comes back to fetch the rest of us.

And that is challenging, for our relationship with Christ will stretch us beyond all our limited hopes of certainty into the wild freedom of trust. And trust in Christ liberates us to ponder our questions peacefully this Lent, knowing ourselves to be safely held.

Now I think the most urgent spiritual question for us to ponder at present is this: 'what do we as a society find the most difficult act of the imagination and of empathy and of faith?' The answer in our news media would appear to lie in the many accounts of Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, the fear of migrants, and the desire to discover and assert a very narrowly defined national identity. This aggression, this fear, this xenophobia runs counter to the will of God. As Paul says in this morning's reading, 'there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.'

In short, 'How good are we at recognising the Christ in the stranger who comes to our gate?'

I fear we sometimes, too often, suffer from the wilful inability to recognise the spiritual life, the Christ, in the other man and woman, the stranger at our gates, especially those from another faith or another ethnic race. This inability we know from European and world history can lead to the most catastrophic fracturing of our very fragile civil society, and can make whole societies blind to the love of God.

But it need not be so.

For example, one of the most radical and influential books of the last 170 years is *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. A book written by an American woman, Harriet Beecher Stowe, a passionate campaigner against slavery, it set a nation, the USA, alight. Whatever its shortcomings to modern tastes, this book was in its day truly shocking. And the reason it shocked was that it portrayed poor black slaves as children of God, beloved of God, to a world that doubted whether a black man or a black woman had an immortal soul. That time in history was witness to the beginnings of a painful awakening to a spiritual truth which we are still learning today; to see the Christ in those of another race, and to recognise that by our indifference and incomprehension we are truly a slave to sin. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published in 1852, nine years before the American Civil War, a long time ago, but the issues it confronts, above all the essence of what it is to be human, still confront us in our individual lives and in our life as a community and as a nation.

Listen to some passages from the death of Uncle Tom following a flogging ordered by his slave owner, Simon Legree, and ponder how far we have travelled on this journey of opening our hearts and minds and eyes to see the Christ in the other, and ponder how far we have yet to travel. The passage begins:

‘Don’t call me poor fellow, George!’ said Tom solemnly. ‘I have been poor fellow, but that’s all past and gone now. I’m right in the door, going into glory! Heaven has come! I’ve got the victory! The Lord Jesus has given it to me! Glory be to his name!’

George was awe-struck at the force, the vehemence, the power with which these broken sentences were uttered. He sat gazing in silence.

Tom grasped his hand, and continued: ‘Only tell Chloe ye found me going into glory; and that I couldn’t stay for no one. And tell her the Lord stood by me everywhere, and always, and made everything light and easy.’

He began to draw his breath with long, deep inspirations; and his broad chest rose and fell heavily. The expression of his face was that of a conqueror.

'Who – who – who shall separate us from the love of Christ?' he said in a voice that contended with mortal weakness; and with a smile he fell asleep.

George sat fixed with solemn awe. It seemed to him that the place was holy; he closed the lifeless eyes and rose up from the dead.

He turned. Legree, the slave owner, was standing sullenly behind him.

Fixing his eyes on Legree, George simply said, pointing to the dead, 'You have got all you ever can of him. What shall I pay you for the body? I will take it away, and bury it decently.'

'I don't sell dead niggers' said Legree'.

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of us are one in Christ Jesus."

Amen.