

LENT 1 Yr A 2017

St David's Eucharist

'How are you doing?' 'I'm good thanks, how about you?'

An unremarkable greeting, ubiquitous among younger people, but an interesting turn of phrase when you stop to think about it. How has goodness entered the equation I wonder, as against the older idea of wellness? Has it anything to do with the virtue of goodness or is the word simply a varnish – it simply sounds good but isn't anything deeper than that? Is it a straw in the wind?

Even Jesus, when once addressed by a questioner as 'Good Master', replies 'Why do you call me good? God alone is good.'

When he says that, I don't think it's false modesty. I think it simply reveals Jesus as a man – a real human being – who knows all too well how easy it is to be seduced away from the reality about himself and the human condition which he shares with us all.

In today's gospel we are given a little insight into that interior struggle he faced as he began his public ministry. He is indeed, as the Hebrew letter says, tempted as we are.

The serpent was more crafty than any of the other creatures so he tempts Jesus with quick fixes that touch his potential weaknesses: why don't you dazzle people with miracles, make a show of your faith by some spectacular stunt, make a power-grab, lead a freedom movement?

Well here we are once more on the first Sunday of Lent, that time of preparation for the Easter feast during which the Church has always encouraged its members to put aside the things that get in the way of the influence of God's Holy Spirit in their lives.

There is, of course, a classic list of those impediments which you don't hear much about these days, maybe for good reason as we shall see. Remember them? Pride, envy, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony and lust.

But until I read a book called *Finding Happiness** by Christopher Jamison I hadn't realised there was another: Acedia. No, I hadn't heard of the word either. It's Latin for carelessness. And it was one of the obstacles, along with those other seven, which the early monks who lived in the desert began to realise kept them from getting closer to God. As they wrestled with their inner lives they noticed patterns of distraction and evasion.

Acedia is perhaps the most insidious because it can hide itself very successfully – so successfully in fact that we no longer know it's there. Acedia, or spiritual carelessness acts on us by allowing us to fill the space inside us – our soul, to use a rather old-fashioned word – with all sorts of other things to distract us from the pursuit of – well, happiness.

It evacuates the space we need for God so that it can be filled up with all manner of other things – vanity, greed, anger and the rest. And it misleads us into thinking we can be happy if only we have more things, more sex, more power and so on. It's a lie, like all things that lead away from God – as that wily serpent knows well.

The other day I came across an article with the eye-grabbing title of 'Is your smartphone making you stupid?' The Oscar-winning actor Eddie Redmayne obviously thinks so because he's given his up in favour of – yes one of these (Nokia handset) – which is about to be re-launched. Gosh, a phone that's just a phone! Whatever next?

The article goes on to talk about the shallowness of the average communication via a smartphone; using one constantly reduces our attention span; it reduces our capacity to recall things – because it's so easy to look things up; it allows us to appear thoughtful without much thought

– ‘Happy Birthday’ is much easier to tap and send on a smartphone than to write and post a card (which most people actually prefer) or even – heavens – going to see the person yourself.

If we think the spiritual life is too much effort, or is not worth the space, or is even not true, then that’s the evidence that Acedia is having an effect on our lives. If we’re tempted to give it all up and say ‘what’s the point?’ or think our fellow-Christians are a bunch of moronic nutters, then that will be the work of an inner unrealised dynamic. And it’s one we’ll not deal with until we give ourselves the time and space to confront it.

Lent is about doing just that. It aims to help us take stock of our lives and to see where we are being led and by what. It’s an opportunity to fill the inner space – our soul – with what it longs for: true nourishment.

Unsurprisingly, Jesus offers us some good advice for doing just that in today’s gospel.

1. Live by the word of God – read the scriptures daily.
2. Trust God – pray, speak to God, build up a personal and intimate relationship which will help you grow in trust. And do it regularly or it won’t happen.

3. Worship God; serve God. Be part of a community of faith because being a Christian by yourself is not what Jesus wants – he builds a community of believers and he knows we need others to help us.

And yes, it all takes time, it needs perseverance, it needs intentional space, it's a long haul. But instead of filling our lives with all sorts of activities which divert us from the void within we will only find true happiness when we allow the Holy Spirit, Jesus' special gift to us, the chance to occupy the God-space that's there in all of us, ready-made to receive her. I'm afraid just giving up chocolate is unlikely to hack it!

Christopher Jamison describes his own experience of this when he first entered the monastery at Worth in Sussex, with its daily round of common prayer based on scripture, the recitation of the psalms and times of silence.

'I found my new way of life quite debilitating and the first six months left me exhausted. There is a set time and place for everything in a monastery: we pray together six times a day, we always eat together, we usually eat in silence; there is no tv and at night there is absolute silence. Above all, no matter how kind the other monks are, you are on your own.

I began to suffer bouts of illness, spent Christmas in bed and was not enjoying myself; the abbot at the time nearly asked me to leave.

‘What I had to face up to was my own weaknesses and my own sins. The discipline of the regular life meant that nothing distracted me from my own interior world, which now came into the foreground... I had to admit that I could not handle my interior world on my own; I needed support and guidance...

‘Easter came and something changed: I realised that the exterior framework which I found so demanding had led me to a new place where I was a freer person... Above all I saw that I needed to keep facing my own interior world and its needs... I needed to recognise my own needs and have a process for meeting them, so that I could then be truly available for others and not impose my needs on them.’

‘I looked back and began to realise that, like a skilled guide, God was leading me through difficult mountain passes of discipline to a new world that I had not visited before.’

It’s that new world begun on the first Easter day that this Lent is meant to lead us to. Have a good one!

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