

Sermon on the First Sunday of Lent

9th March 2025

The Revd Steven Cooper

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

Let us pray.

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Well, good morning and it's a pleasure to share with you in the leading of our worship here at St Marylebone today. As Fr Robert mentioned at the start, my name's Steven, and for my day job I'm the National Ecumenical Officer for the Methodist Church in Great Britain. But in that role, it's very good to be able to have a foot in some other liturgical camps than Methodist alone—and so you'll often perhaps have seen me with my wife, Ruth and daughter Seraphina (who's one of the one of the acolytes today) in the congregation here, sometimes, on a Sunday morning at St Marylebone.

One of Seraphina's favourite programmes to watch (you can get it on Netflix) is called 'Total Drama Island'. It's a cartoon and it's based in a sort of 'Love Island' or 'I'm a Celebrity...Get Me Out of Here' kind of a scenario. And it's always—as the title suggests—*drama*. It's in a sense parodying an aspect of our entertainment culture, where we are led to *expect* there to be drama.

Now when I think about the passage that we've just heard from the Gospel according to Luke, you can certainly read a lot of drama into it: this sense, perhaps, of a showdown between Jesus and the devil... Jesus having to resist the devil's temptations, and make it through unscathed to the other side.

But actually, what perhaps strikes me, as I consider this passage from the gospel, is how *undramatic* is Jesus' response to the devil.

Jesus doesn't really seem to *struggle* at all—in spite, by the end of it all, of being famished. He simply seems to answer calmly and straightforwardly the questions, the challenges that the devil puts to him.

'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.'

All we see is: "Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone.'"

'To you, I will give their glory and all the authority of these kingdoms of the world... Just worship me and it can all be yours.'

Jesus is not swayed for a moment. He simply answers, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."'"

And then the devil challenges Jesus to put God to the test, to see what dramatic actions God can do—by sending angels to lift him up if he's to jump off the pinnacle of the temple. Jesus doesn't buy into the drama: He simply says, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."'"

And that's it. There is no sign of a real struggle that Jesus has. Jesus is able to answer, unwaveringly, the questions, the challenges that the devil puts to him.

When I was at university, one of the things I enjoyed doing, aside from my regular studies, was being a member of the university's Astronomy Society; and the Astronomy Society had access for its members to a big telescope—a *big* optical telescope in a one of those domes, and you had to open the dome...and it was a fantastic resource to be able to use whenever it was available.

But often, trying to use the telescope could be frustrating. It could be difficult, it could be, in a sense, dramatic. If you're on a typical British night when there's a lot of cloud in the sky, you might have this perfect idea of what you want to see—perhaps the moons of Jupiter, the rings close up of Saturn. And just as you're lining the telescope up... clouds get in the way. It can be very frustrating... And likewise very exciting, when the clouds clear and you get just the moment that you need.

By comparison, I grew up in Manchester, near to Cheshire, where you'll find the Jodrell Bank Observatory, famous for its huge radio telescope. The thing about a radio telescope is that it can see straight through the clouds. Clouds provide no drama for a radio astronomer.

And I think, when we think about the gospel reading today, there's no drama in Jesus' response because he *sees straight through* all the distractions that the devil is trying to sway him with.

His vision is not in any way clouded by these attempts that the devil makes to offer him this magnificent collection of kingdoms, all this authority; to turn the stone into bread when he's approaching a state of being famished. Jesus responds without drama, because he sees straight through it—to the bigger vision of what God makes possible.

When the devil talks about "I will give you the glory of all the kingdoms of the world": to many of us, that might seem a tempting prospect. But to Jesus, he's unswayed by that, because to him, that is a *small* vision. Jesus can see that the fullness of what is offered in God is *so much more* than that.

It used to be the case that I worked as my day job for the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. And on one occasion in 2008 he was invited to the

philosophy society at Westminster School, not very far from here. And one of the questions, in fact the first question, that one of the sixth formers at that school asked the then archbishop was, 'Why are you a Christian?' And the answer that Rowan Williams gave has always to me been a really impressive and inspirational way to respond to that question. I'm just going to quote the beginning of what he said. 'Why are you a Christian?', he was asked. He responded:

"This could obviously take the next three hours or so but I'll try to be brief. I can answer it at least two levels. I could give you the plain descriptive answer which is I am a Christian because I was brought up in a broadly Christian home, in a broadly Christian country—that is Wales—but there is always more to it than that. And it was as a teenager that I started beginning to get a sense that the stories and words that had been washing around over me since I was a small child might actually relate to my own experience and what there was to be hoped for. But I guess it was when I was 14 or 15 that I really began to see that the big issues that I was at that time wrestling with studying English, studying history, actually coalesced around the great ideas that my Christian faith was presenting to me. And those were things such as, 'What's the horizon for human beings? How big is a human being?' Christian faith says that humanity is created in the image of God and that it can grow into a level of liberty, capacity to love, even capacity to change things, that is really reflective of God; and it seemed to me then and it seems to me now one of the most ambitious accounts of what it is like to be human that you could possibly give. And I think it is quite a good idea to have an ambitious account of what human beings are capable of, and that gave me a real reason for believing it and the context of the story of creation and redemption."

Jesus offers us an *ambitious vision* of what is possible for us as human beings and for our world.

And yet our world in which we live is one in which we're very often tempted to believe, "this is as good as it gets." Or to accept some vision that those with vested interests might put before us, saying, "take this: this is as good as you're going to get."

We see that, without much difficulty, in much of the world's politics at the moment—when it comes to questions of peace in Ukraine; when it comes to questions of whether all can thrive in our economy; when it comes to questions of whether all may be included fully in the same way in terms of the diversity of our human family; when it comes to whether we can afford to safeguard the environment for future generations, or whether we just have to accept some sort of a compromise. We're so often told: *Take this option. It's the best you're going to get. Don't expect anything more.*

It's a temptation that's also easy for us to fall into at the level of our individual life: to think — particularly if we are, in what might be thought of in conventional terms as, 'doing well' in life — that "we've got it made—this is as good as it gets." And not to have

ambition for something more than that, because we don't see that there is something more on offer.

I've actually had a kind of association with St Marylebone Church over many years because I used to be part of the lay leadership team at Hinde Street Methodist Church: your covenant partner just up Marylebone High Street. And I was involved in the link between Hinde Street Methodist Church and St Marylebone. And one of the things that always seemed to be a challenge at Hinde Street from our perspective there, was how to really engage with many in this local community in Marylebone, who, it's fair to say, in many cases are well-off, affluent, doing very well at life. How to interest them in what the church has to offer? Because so often folk seemed to be very comfortable, very content with what they have. What more might the church have to say to them that could capture their interest, capture their vision?

Jesus reminds us, however much we might feel comfortable in ourselves, however much we might be tempted to think things are as good as they can get: actually, *we can do better*. We can have a better vision for what is possible in our world.

Lent is a season that draws our attention towards Jesus' death on the cross: by which God overcame death—even death: the demonstration that ultimately, nothing is impossible in God.

We associate Lent, perhaps, with a time of abstinence, a time of giving things up. But Lent is not offered as a time of aimless austerity—simply denying ourselves as though this is, intrinsically, therapeutic in some undefined way. It *may be* a time of austerity as we enter into the discipline of Lent — but it's with a purpose: that we might clear from our view the vain or material things to which we usually gravitate to find satisfaction; in order to focus more clearly on, be reminded of, that in Christ we find a much greater vision.

It's this greater vision that Paul was seeking to capture something of, in the words that we've heard from him in his letter to the Romans this morning. He speaks of a vision of salvation—a vision of the change that God is able to make for those who put their faith in him—which goes beyond the conventional vision, of what God offered, in Paul's time. Paul emphasises: "Everyone who calls on the name of The Lord shall be saved."

And to quote Charles Wesley, formerly of this parish:

Come, sinners, to the gospel feast;
Let every soul be Jesu's guest;
Ye need *not one* be left behind,
For God hath bidden *all mankind*.

Sent by the Lord, on you I call;
The invitation is to all;
Come, *all the world!* come, sinner, thou!
All things in Christ are ready now.

Charles Wesley's words echo, there, those of St Paul in capturing this sense of the breadth and scope of the vision of what is possible in God.

They speak of the 'gospel feast'—and as we come to this table of Holy Communion this morning, the sacrament reminds us symbolically of that bigger vision of what is possible in Christ, who by his holy cross has redeemed the world — and in whom we realise that in God all things are possible; that not one need be left behind.

As we enter into this season of Lent, let us keep that bigger vision as our focus: that vision of a world in which *all* may thrive, all may find a place as children of God.

Let us seek to see through the clouds that would get in the way, that might distract us with what is ultimately a small vision of what is "as good as it gets": keeping in view the vision of Jesus crucified, and raised: a vision that offers us—and the world—so much more.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.