

## FARNHAM PARISH CHURCH

Church and Community

Bible Readings:       Philippians 3:17-4:1

Luke 13:31-35

Date:                    17 March 2019

Theme:                 Temptation and Focus

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Last week, we spoke about the temptations Jesus faced in the desert. We saw that for 40 days and 40 nights he was tempted in every way like we are but without sin.

Only then when he was at his weakest, did the devil stick the boot in and come up with three specific temptations or testings. We saw that they related to Distraction, Deceit and Deflection and Jesus came against each of them with the powerful word of God saying three times, again and again: “It is written ...”

At the end of Luke 4, we saw that phrase ... “the devil left him until an opportune time” ...

It’s just a truism that things aren’t always what they seem. My son Josh and his friends have been up to London recently to watch the recordings of two very well-known TV shows: Graham Norton and Michael McIntyre. They had a wonderful evening each time, but they were really surprised when the show actually appeared on the telly.

With Graham Norton, they had seen introductions, music at the start and long interviews. What went out on the network was music at the end and short interviews. The

editor had done his work well ... but it was not what they thought it was going to be.

With Michael McIntyre, they had seen all the ingredients of the show, the bit with the mobile phone, the bit with the surprise star, the late-night quiz ... all these bits were there. But when the show went out on the telly, they were all jumbled up and what they had seen might have been shown in the previous week or the next week or right at the end of the series. The editor had done his work well ... but it was not what they thought it was going to be.

The devil left him until an opportune time ... we might have thought would lead to Luke, the editor, telling us another series of encounters between Jesus and the devil like we have had in chapter 4. But no ... he has done his work well ... because here in chapter 13, we see the devil is back in the action, but this time not as we might have expected from before. This time he is present in the words and actions of the Pharisees and Herod, the King. And just so today, the devil can be active in the very ordinary and the everyday. He can do his work of distraction, deceit and deflection through ordinary people like you and like me.

*<sup>31</sup> At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, ‘Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.’ <sup>32</sup> He said to them, ‘Go and tell that fox for me,<sup>[c]</sup> “Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.*

Distraction, Deceit, Deflection – the three key ways the devil uses, three key strategies he employs to try to

prevent the Jesus project from advancing, to try to halt the progress of the coming of the Kingdom, to try to have his way rather than allow God the Father to have his. But clearly they haven't worked. Jesus is still pressing on. And here, in chapter 13, we see Jesus encountering opposition again, coming out from under the covers.

The early part of chapter 13 sets out some of the Kingdom vision, powerful descriptions of who Jesus is and what he came to do:

he tells people (Jew and Gentile) they are to repent – to have a complete change of mind;  
the barren fig tree indicates that time is running out;  
the healing of the crippled woman is a glimpse of heaven in the everyday where pain and suffering and sadness are no more;  
the opposition from those who see this miracle reminds us that discipleship is both costly and difficult, as it was for Jesus – he was misunderstood, misinterpreted, misrepresented: people seemed to prefer that people were kept sick rather than made well.

the parables of the mustard seed and of the yeast, shows that the kingdom agenda is an expansionist programme – it's for all people everywhere.

and the picture of the narrow door is a stark warning that just pitching up for church, being some kind of nominal Christian, having some sort of nodding acquaintance with Jesus when we feel like it is just not enough. We must be hearers and doers of the word.

Our lifestyle must respect and reflect that of Jesus himself. Someone once asked the question: "if you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict?"

It's with all this in the background, the landscape of the coming, growing kingdom, that the devil once again, through the words and actions of the Pharisees and Herod, raise questions about Jesus' probity and integrity. If the devil can't get Jesus to stand aside, he will just come against him straight and try to do away with him:

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And let's notice that Jesus is surprisingly firm. This is not gentle Jesus meek and mild, this is Jesus protecting his role, keeping his focus, guarding the sheep, identifying and responding to the enemy, by calling him out.

Ian Paul, a contemporary theologian, puts it like this:

*The metaphor of 'fox' with reference to Herod could suggest either cunning or intelligence, but in context neither of these is likely. Another proverbial sense of the word is of malicious destructiveness; if you have kept chickens and been visited by a fox, you might have experienced the loss of one chicken and the pointless*

*killing of the others, as though the fox just enjoyed the killing spree.*

So first we see the devil entering the story once again. And we see Luke confirming this in the next verse.

*<sup>33</sup> Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem.”*

We see Jesus' clarity of purpose. He will not be deflected, deceived or distracted. His journey is toward Jerusalem and nothing will keep him from fulfilling his promise and his calling there.

Next, we see something of the heart of Jesus for the lost. If we had any doubt that Jesus had feelings, worries, concerns, hopes or desires for his people, in v34 we see his compassion writ large.

### **Compassion ...**

*<sup>34</sup> Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*

There is a great discussion and debate running at present, as we know, about matters of appropriate and inappropriate compassion and about gender and identity.

- a. Compassion: Stacey Dooley has come in for some real stick about being a “white saviour” – visiting Africa and bringing her fame, fortune, wealth and know-how to people who definitely need help, but who may not be active participants in the solution. Being done unto by an apparent “white saviour” is not regarded as helpful. David Lammy has made all this very plain. And yet, the compassion Stacey Dooley, other Comic Relief people and all manner of charity workers show, working with those in need on the ground, empowering local people to make changes and transformation can surely only be a good thing, can't it?
- b. Gender and identity: girls who sense that they are boys really; and boys who feel that they are girls really. We have counselling, medical and even surgical intervention on the radar, in a rapidly changing and hugely challenging area of mental health concern. What the future holds for us in any of this, time alone will tell.

It would be so helpful if the verses about Jesus' compassion were straightforward. Sadly, they are not entirely!

This verse which speaks about Jesus' compassion for people using the feminine image of a hen gathering her brood is not to say that Jesus thought he was a hen, really. Or that he thought he both a man and a woman really. It simply offers us the picture of a man, looking at a people

who are lost, and, from his more feminine side, wants to embrace, enfold and even “mother” them.

Indeed, the whole story of the OT gives us a similar insight into the history of God’s people. In morning prayer this week, we have been looking at part of the early chapters of Jeremiah. Here the prophet records the desire of the people again and again to do their thing rather than God’s thing, to turn away from him rather than towards him, to fracture rather than hold together, to rebel, rather than conform. And we feel and we hear God’s sadness and regret in all this. He has loved them with an everlasting love. Why don’t they, why won’t they simply choose to love him back?

Compassion then finally makes way for resolution. Jesus decides to move on ... and we see his determined steps, taking him towards Jerusalem.

### **Next steps between now and Palm Sunday ...**

*<sup>35</sup> See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when<sup>[d]</sup> you say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”*

And sometimes resolution or determination does mean that we leave things for the present. We don’t take overlong in dealing with them. We simply need to move on. For the present time there is nothing more to say.

Now of course, a lot happens, as we know, between this episode in chapter 13 and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem later on in the story. That’s when the crowd shouts “Hosanna!” and “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” Jesus has work to do. It’s not that he doesn’t love them or care for them or desire to spend time with them. It’s just that he has other priorities which are more pressing.

Still to come ... there is healing. There is teaching on humility and hospitality. There is the parable of the great dinner and some illustration of the cost of following Jesus. There’s the three great stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. The story of the dishonest manager, further teaching on the kingdom and the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Well known phrases follow like “hanging millstones round necks” and “having faith the size of a mustard seed.” The healing of the 10 lepers. The widow and the judge. The Pharisee and the tax collector. The rich young ruler. The blind beggar. The Jericho story of Zachaeus and the parable of the ten talents.

There’s lots still to come ... In other words, Jesus cannot pursue this compassion thing now.

Sometimes, it’s right to leave things you can’t solve or progress right now and just move on. We know this from a Maths paper where we can’t do question three, but if we stopped there and stayed with that too long, we would never get to questions 4 to 10 which we can do.

As we take steps this Lent ourselves, daily nearer to Jerusalem, and to the events of Palm Sunday, Holy Week and Easter, let's remember:

the reality of the continuing work of the devil expressed in the life of Jesus and those who opposed him;

let's remember Jesus' compassion for the least, the last and lost expressed in story and in action towards the poor;  
and

let's be both inspired and challenged by Jesus' focus, to know when it is time to speak, when to be silent, and when enough really is enough.

Let's pray ...