

Canterbury Diocese Clergy Conference

Saturday

Luke 4:1-13

I don't know whether you saw the programme, *Classic Goldie*, on BBC 2 during August. Drum'n'bass musician Goldie was commissioned to write a short piece of music for orchestra, chorus and the organ of the Royal Albert Hall as part of the Proms. The challenge was that he couldn't read or write music. So the support team had the job of trying to get what was in his head out of it and down on paper for the orchestra to play.

The theme was easy enough – he just had to hum it, and they wrote it down. It was the harmony that was the problem. They wanted to know what notes went *with* the theme, and he couldn't tell them. So they suggested that he sat at the piano and played around, and tried out a number of different notes to see what worked best. He tried for a minute or so, and then gave up in some distress, saying that it was doing his head in, and that it made him want to smash the piano up.

I immediately felt a taxi-driver moment coming on, because it seemed to me a very revealing incident. It seemed to me that Goldie's frustration was rather symptomatic of how we have cheated a whole generation and more out of the chance to be as creative as they have it in them to be. Our educational system – and indeed our whole zeitgeist – has tended to downplay the need for technique, skill, craft, form, in favour of 'self-expression'. We have encouraged people to write, and have not wanted to put them off, or constrain them, by bothering them with too much grammar. We have wanted people to be able to create their own music, and have not wanted to put barriers in the way of that creativity by making them go through the tedium of Grade 5 theory. The problem with that – if I may for a moment risk coming across as a sort of literary and musical equivalent of Geoff Boycott banging on about 'techneek' – the problem with that is that, far from enabling self-expression, it has actually denied people the very tools that would have enabled them to give expression to what was in their heads. Leaving them with the palpable frustration of Goldie wanting to smash up the (carefully crafted) grand piano.

The mundane, repetitive, boring discipline of grammar, be it literary or musical, is what equips someone to express themselves/ liberates them to be creative and in consequence to be more fully alive and to make a richer contribution to their world.

It seems to me that this principle applies not just to languages, literature, music and 'creecket', but to pretty well every area of human endeavour, including our moral lives, our spiritual lives, and our attempts to find out what it is exactly that each of us is for.

Certainly, Jesus does not attempt to work out what *He* was for without resorting extensively to the unappealing, and almost literally unappetising, discipline of fasting. He took Himself away from the bombarding and conflicting voices of human society. And after fasting for 'forty days and forty nights', he, like John Cleese in the Cheese Shop

sketch, 'came over all peckish', or 'famished' as the NRSV more earnestly puts it. As His confrontation with the devil unfolds, it becomes clear that He had been paying profound attention to Scripture. There is, for Him as for us, in this sphere as in every other, no bypassing of the need for discipline.

And notice that I talked of Jesus' attention to Scripture as being profound, rather than prolonged. Most of us here don't have vast amounts of time at our disposal. Discipline, like eating, is not so much about quantity, as about regularity. Spending ten minutes a day learning German irregular verbs is as likely to get them to sink into you permanently as doing a week-long splurge. Whether forty days is intended literally, I don't know – it does sound suspiciously resonant of Israel's forty years in the wilderness – but for most of us a little regularly is likely to be the way forward, and for some of us we shouldn't, for medical reasons, fast at all. But however we work out the details, **the spiritual disciplines** are an essential provision for the journey, and, as I have been asked to speak under the title of Provisions for the Journey, they are the first item I want to put in our rucksack this morning.

The second thing I want to put in the rucksack is **an inhabiting of the multi-dimensionality of existence**.

There was a man who was dying, and, as he lay on his death bed, the most glorious smell of baking bread wafted over him. He thought to himself, 'I must have a piece of that, if it's the last thing I do, which it probably will be.' So he summoned up every ounce of energy and strength, forced himself out of bed and crawled out of his bedroom, along the corridor, down the stairs, into the kitchen, where his wife was mixing up another batch. And there, on a baking tray, were two dozen freshly baked bread rolls, smelling divine (depending on what God smells like, I suppose). He reached out his hand to fulfil his dying wish, and his wife turned round, rapped his fingers with a large wooden spoon and said, 'Keep your hands off – they're for the funeral.'

Bread is fabulous stuff – in a myriad different forms, it sustains human life the world over. But it doesn't stave off death. It enriches our life – but it doesn't transcend it. It doesn't offer us any other dimensions than the ones of which we are already aware. And, good though those everyday dimensions are, they are not enough for human beings. Life that is short and shallow, mortal and one-dimensional, is not an environment in which human beings can flourish. We are made for more. We cannot live by bread alone. We cannot live on the horizontal plane alone. Only when it is dissected by the vertical plane can we begin to plot the co-ordinates of significance. As Os Guinness says, 'Shut off from transcendence, we are shut up within triviality' - and we know it.

There's a scene in *Educating Rita*, where the whole party is in the pub, very drunk, and they are all singing along raucously with the song on the juke box – except for Rita's mother, who says quietly to no one in particular, 'There's got to be a better song to sing than this.'

The spiritual disciplines may not be exciting or compelling, but it is through them that we learn to compose a better song. It is through them that we explore the other dimensions of who we are. It is through them that we open ourselves up to transcendence and discover that, in the half-light of transcendence, nothing and no one is trivial.

And when we open ourselves up to transcendence, we discover that it is personal. It's not about creating a spiritual atmosphere, it's not about calming music and candles – it's about communication. It's about every *word* that comes from the mouth of God. It's about relationship. Not an easy one. Not a straightforward one. It's a relationship that's difficult to discern, hard to tune in to, partial, fitful, costly, ambiguous. But it is what we are for, and it expands us.

That is why the second provision that I want to put in our rucksack this morning is an inhabiting of the multi-dimensionality of existence.

The third bit of equipment for the journey is **a robust awareness that God, currently, does not always get His way.**

The devil comes to a lawyer and says, 'I'll make you unbelievably rich. You'll win every case, be the youngest QC ever, become Lord Chancellor once that ancient office is reinstated, and you'll go down in history as a famous reforming law lord. All I ask of you in exchange is the eternal soul of your wife and children.' The lawyer thought for a moment, and then said, 'What's the catch?'

The devil comes to Jesus and shows Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment, and says to Him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority, for *it has been handed over to me.*' And the interesting thing is that Jesus doesn't say, 'No, it hasn't – you're making it up!' He seems to allow that the glory and the authority of the kingdoms of the earth is in Satan's gift. So if they have been handed over to Satan, who has handed them over? God? Why would God hand over His good creation into the hands of a malevolent power? Why would He seem to abdicate His own authority and give it to a destructive force? There was one overhead projector I saw which proclaimed, not that 'Our God reigns', but that 'Our God resigns', but I always took that to be a typo.

No, I suggest that it is we who have handed over the kingdoms of the earth and their splendour. It is we who, by our wrong choices and wrong acts and by our worship of that which is not God, have given away the authority over creation with which we were endowed at the beginning. We have given to Satan a power and an operational scope he would not otherwise have. He has, from us, a *de facto* authority that he does not have *de jure*. His authority is parasitic upon us abdicating ours.

That is why Jesus is reported as calling Satan 'the ruler of this world' (John 16:11). That's why Paul calls him 'the god of this age' (2 Cor 4:4) and why 1 John says that 'the whole world lies under the power of the evil one' (5:19).

I believe that we need to take this with far more seriousness than we have tended to do. We have tended to believe that God is in control in such a way that what happens in His world is ultimately what He wants to happen. So when terrible things happen, we have felt the need to justify them in some way.

‘They’re terrible, but we deserve them’, say some.

‘They’re terrible, but they’re good for us’, say others.

‘They’re terrible, but they result in God’s greater glory’, say others, leaving us to wonder what sort of a god it is who gets glory from putting his creatures in a risky and painful environment and then taking them out of it.

People think that we Christians believe that all suffering is what God wants. Listen to this extract from Ben Elton’s book, *Dead Famous*, in which a murder takes place on screen in a reality TV show. Chief Inspector Coleridge, the detective, saw the state of the victim and ...

... knew how much he wanted to catch this killer. He could not abide savagery. He had never got used to it; it scared him and made him question his faith. After all, why would God possibly want to engineer such a thing? Because He moved in mysterious ways, of course; that was the whole point. Because He surpasseth understanding. You weren’t meant to understand. Still, in his job it was hard sometimes to find reasons to believe. Sergeant Hooper hadn’t enjoyed the scene much either, but it was not in his nature to ponder what purpose such horror might have in God’s almighty plan.

The assumption is that, when horror happens, it is God who has engineered it. It was intended in some way. It has some unfathomable place in His plan. That is what Christians are assumed to believe. And, to be fair, we often have.

But it is not what Jesus seems to have believed. He did not believe that the world is how God wanted it: He believed it needed putting right. He did not believe that God is the *de facto* ruler of this world: He believed that Satan was.

Terrible things happen, not despite the fact that God is in charge, but precisely because He isn’t. Not fully. Not yet. And therefore terrible things don’t need to be justified – they need to be prevented, or protested against, or ameliorated, or attacked.

That, after all, was what Jesus did. When the sick were brought to Him, He never sought to justify their illness. He never seemed too concerned about the benefits of which he was depriving them by healing them. He never said, ‘No, I’d better not heal you, because the illness is doing you good, and the suffering is a real blessing, so I’ll just leave you as you are. You have a good day, now!’ Or, if He did, it was never reported. No, He just went ahead and healed them. Because for Him, such suffering had no proper place in God’s purposes or His world.

So what I want to put in our rucksack for the journey from this temptation is a robust awareness that, currently, God does not always get His way. God made the world. It belongs to Him. He is its rightful king. But His reign is currently defied and His rule is temporarily broken. He does not always get His way. We know that, from the fact of sin. In fact, Jesus is the only human being in whom God always *did* get His way. Jesus would not have taught us to pray for God's kingdom to come if it were already here. His kingdom, is a coming hope, not a *fait accompli*. It has broken into our world in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, but it is not yet co-extensive with the world.

And therefore we must *never* assume that the way things are now reflects the will or the purpose of God. We must never defend suffering as being what God wants.

This has a number of ramifications. First of all, for our theology, and in particular our thinking about the problem of evil. Believe that God is unbrokenly in control, and you will feel the need to defend every terrible event as part of the will of God. I fear you will find yourself defending the indefensible and besmirching the love and the goodness of God. You will make Him the cause of people's suffering – and therefore their enemy.

Believe that human beings have handed over the kingship of the world to some alien malevolent power, however, and you will understand that suffering is not to be defended, it is to be prayed against and fought against, it is to be uprooted, it is to be healed, it is to be put right.

Secondly, this has ramifications for our pastoral care. All too often, Christians say to those who are suffering, 'Well, I'm sure God has a purpose for this. I'm sure God knows what He is doing.' But it is not Him who is doing it! It has happened, not because that was His purpose, but because the world has cut itself off from God's purposes and made itself vulnerable to other purposes - hostile purposes and destructive purposes. Suffering is not the purpose of God, and we must not suggest in our theology or our pastoral care that it is. The Archbishop said last night in his conversation with Ian Hislop that, when people are suffering, no theory can help – only people can help. And I'm not pretending that this view can help in that situation. I think all I'm aiming at here is not making things worse for people – and I fear that attributing their suffering to God does precisely that.

And thirdly, it has ramifications for how we engage with our society. In the film, *Babe*, the duck has worked out that anything on the farm that doesn't have a useful role ends up in the pot. And that doesn't seem an attractive option for an ambitious duck, so he pretends to be a rooster and wakes the farmer and his wife up every morning. The horse disapproves of such pretence, and says, rather pompously, 'The secret of happiness is to recognise that the way things are is the way things are.' To which the duck replied, 'Hmph. Well, the way things are *stinks!*'

If you think that the way things are is the way God wants them, you'll be with the horse, and you'll tend to defend the *status quo*. If you think, like 1 John, that the world currently lies under the power of the evil one, then you are with the duck, and you'll seek to change the *status quo*, through faithful prayer and peaceful protest and compassionate action, and

nudge it in the direction of God's coming kingdom. Given the currently broken sovereignty of God, we are called to be peaceful revolutionaries, seeking to embody His rule and His reign and to be inadequate sketches of what that reign might look like when it comes in its fullness.

And how do we do that? Well, first and foremost, by refusing to acknowledge the *de facto* ruler as God, to worship the Lord your God, and serve only Him. There is nothing more subversive of the distortedness of creation than worship of the Creator. A robust awareness that currently God does not always get His way.

The fourth candidate for the rucksack is **a concentration on the undramatic.**

Rowan Atkinson does his own version of the Wedding at Cana. When Jesus turns the water into wine, he tells us that the steward 'knew not whence it had come. But the servants did know, so they applauded loudly in the kitchen. And they said unto the Lord, "How the hell did you do that?" And inquired of Him, "do you do children's parties?" And the Lord said, "No." And the servants said unto Him, "You shouldn't be wasting your time on a one-camel town like Cana. You should be playing in the big arenas in Jerusalem."

If that is the sort of response you are after, then throwing yourself down from the temple is ideal. If you want people's admiration, maybe even their submission. But if you want their *love* ...

Jesus here resists the temptation to use His power to compel belief. He determines to eschew all attempts to impress, all grand gestures, all attention-grabbing set pieces. In all His future ministry, He consistently tells those He heals to say nothing to anyone. He consistently points us away from the dramatic, and directs our attention towards the low-profile, the unflamboyant, the slow, and the otherwise overlooked – to the seed growing underground and out of sight, to what an poor widow puts in the collection plate, to the *least* of these my brethren.

As Alan Lewis puts it, 'in life he ... cloaked his messiahship in questionable ambiguity, refusing at times to give the signs and proofs that sceptics asked for, and seeming to associate any [such] unleashed exercise of the power he had less with his Father's will than with the Devil's wiles.' And that is the determination that He forges here.

For us too, the desire to impress others is largely incompatible with winning their love, or with inducing any other fruitful emotion within them. The more impressed people are, the greater will be the distance between us and them. It is vulnerability, not impressiveness, that draws people close to one another. It is in vulnerability that both pain and power reside. Which is, partly, of course, why the Cross was the most transformative of events. So the fourth bit of provision for the rucksack is a concentration on the undramatic.

Fifthly, **a habit of openness.**

Some years ago, there was a Maths don at Cambridge who was famous for being an incredibly difficult conversationalist. If any other don had a guest at high table, they tried to make sure that they weren't seated by this Maths don or their evening would be pretty silent or tortuous. On one occasion, one of the other dons failed to save their guest from sitting next to this near-mute, and the guest duly tried to engage the Maths don in conversation: 'Are you going away on holiday this summer?' he attempted. There was a very long pause, and then the Maths don said, in a perplexed tone, 'Why do you need to know?' He wasn't trying to be difficult – he just couldn't see why this person he didn't know needed this information.

By contrast, the fifth bit of provision for the rucksack is a habit of openness. The only people who were around during the temptation story were Jesus and the devil. So assuming that Satan didn't sell his story to the tabloids, and that the evangelists didn't behave like the tabloids and make it up, it must have been Jesus who told His disciples about the wrestling and the questioning and the testing that He went through.

Now I am not recommending that we all tell our life stories to unsuspecting strangers on trains, but we are not made to live life in isolation from the support, and the empathy, and the companionship and the wisdom that others can offer. A habit of openness, a habit of allowing someone else in to our difficulties and our deep places, is incredibly hard for some, and risky for everyone. But it is essential in some form if we are to survive – and enjoy – the journey. A habit of openness.

And lastly, the final bit of equipment to put in the rucksack is **an ability to doubt.** Perhaps the key word in this whole passage is the word 'if'. '*If* you are the Son of God. If, if.' Jesus has no sooner heard the words of God spoken to Him, 'You are my Son, whom I love', than He is driven out into the wilderness to hear His Sonship questioned or, at least, defined in such a way as to poison all that God would have Him do. He comes out of the waters of the Jordan with a clear sense of His identity and His calling ringing in His ears, and suddenly He goes through the crucible of doubt. Are the voices internal or external? Or do they perhaps carry such force precisely because the external voice chimes so clearly with, and plays so insidiously upon, the internal?

Notice how Jesus is described as being 'full of the Holy Spirit' at the beginning of the temptation narrative, and as being 'filled with the power of the Spirit' at the end of it. So there is nothing wrong with going through such a time/ testing/ tearing apart as Jesus underwent in the wilderness. There is nothing sinful or even second best about having our identity and our vocation and our very faith assailed in this agonising way.

Indeed, not only is it not sinful. It is also inevitable, and, though it comes at the hands of a malicious antagonist, when it is offered up to the very God we are simultaneously doubting and desperately trying to hold on to, it can become wonderfully formative and revelatory.

Five very quick points about doubt. First, doubt is about being finite. We don't know everything. We don't see the whole picture. We know only a minute fraction of what there is to know. And therefore it is not given to us to have certainty within. Only God is infinite and sees the whole picture, so only God could be certain, and only by reference to Him can we know anything properly.

Secondly, doubt is about living in a fallen world. Because the world is not as it was intended to be, because we have handed over our authority, and thus given power, to a hostile, destructive force, the world no longer *looks* as if it was made by God. We live in a world that is out of joint with the deep truth of its own existence – a world that does not fully reflect the love that engendered it, nor the wisdom that sustains it. Therefore faith cannot be by sight, and it has to struggle to maintain itself in the face of the way things seem.

Thirdly, doubt is about being honest. In C S Lewis' *Pilgrim's Regress*, John is on a journey, looking for the island of which he has caught glimpses, which symbolises his longing and his desire for that which can fulfil and give meaning, though he is not sure whether the Island actually exists or whether it is the product of his own wish projection. He has met with Reason along the way, and they have this conversation. Reason says, 'Who told you that the Island was an imagination of yours?' 'Well [says John], you would not assure me that it was anything real.' 'Nor that it was not.' replies Reason. 'But I must think it is one or the other.' 'By my father's soul, you must *not* – until you have some evidence. Can you not remain in doubt?' 'I don't know that I have ever tried.' [says John.] 'You must learn to, [says Reason] if you are to come far with me.' The ability to doubt is necessary if we are to be honest, and it is a necessary bit of equipment for the journey.

Fourthly, doubt is about growing. If you are rock climbing – and I have to confess I adhere to Wainwright's views on rock climbing so I am speaking from almost complete ignorance. But if you are rock climbing, you have four things with which to hold on – two hands and two feet. If you won't let go with any of them, you will never move. You will never make progress. You will never make it up the rock face. Letting go with *all four* is not recommended, but letting go with one, so that you can reach for a higher handhold or foothold, is the only way to progress. Similarly, without doubt, without letting go of something we previously believed and searching around for something less inadequate, we will never grow in our knowledge and understanding of God. We will never grow in our faith. And we shall probably grow tired eventually and drop off. Doubt is about growth.

And lastly, doubt is about self-definition. It's precisely out of this prolonged period of 'Iffiness' that Jesus seems to develop a clearer sense of who it is that He is called to be, and what it is that He is called to do. And it is that clarified understanding, tested in the

furnace of questioning, that, as we have seen, Jesus then consistently lived out in His private life and public ministry.

Just before I was ordained, I went through a year of doubt and depression that caused me to question all that I had till then believed. It caused me to scream out to a God who seemed unbearably absent, and whose goodness and relevance I just couldn't see. Which wasn't good timing!

I now look back on that experience as my main qualification for ministry. Without going through some such experience, I would have been a walking pastoral disaster. (Well, even more of a walking pastoral disaster!) I don't believe that God wanted me to go through such agonising. But living in a fallen world, and in a world where there are malicious forces that are antagonistic to faith, we are bound to be vulnerable to such experiences occasionally, and, under the leading of the Spirit those wilderness times can become oases that irrigate our hearts and our minds, give us a purged and enlarged understanding of God, a less grating impact upon others, and a gentler and more understanding attitude to the suffering, struggles and failings of others, and of ourselves. I would not still be on the journey without an ability to doubt in the rucksack, so I'll keep it there for an opportune time!