

‘Nothing but the best’. Sermon first preached by Dr Christine Hoffman at FUMC Palmetto, 21st February 2019

Do you like horror movies? I don’t especially like them, but I do like reading books that keep you in an agitated state about what is going to happen next. Did you notice the ominous ending to Luke’s account of the temptation of Jesus? He writes: ‘When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.’ Only Luke of the three gospel writers who narrate Jesus’ temptation as he is starting his ministry adds this warning that the devil hasn’t finished with Jesus. It reminds me of an experience as a church organist. In my last two years as a high school student, I used to play for the Eucharist every Sunday morning in an Anglican Church within walking distance of my home. I don’t know whether you’ve ever noticed but our organist and our pianist sit very still and pay very close attention to what is going on in worship. It is not only that they are worshipping themselves, nor that they do not want to distract others from worshipping, but also that they need to be ready to play at the right moment. Sometimes (as in early worship last week), they might have to play unexpectedly. Now in my teenage experience as an organist, I had to concentrate particularly hard. Not only was I young, but I was also playing in a denomination quite different from the one I was brought up in. In the British Methodist Church, most worship services comprised what might be called ‘a hymn sandwich’. There would usually be five hymns, each with a filling in between, such as a prayer, a reading, an offering, or an announcement. The Anglican Church, however, like the Episcopal church here had services that were rather more complicated for the organist. The creed and the words of institution in the Lord’s Supper were all sung. There are all sorts of responses that you have to be ready to accompany. One of these was to be the source of my embarrassment in relation to Luke’s temptation narrative. The church was having an interregnum, the period between the departing and the incoming priest. In this period, the priest of a neighboring church was in charge. He would come and conduct the early Eucharist at All Saints’ Church, Oswaldtwistle and then drive off to conduct worship at his own Emmanuel Church, Oswaldtwistle. I too would run down the hill, after my organ playing, to teach in the Methodist Sunday School.

On the Sunday morning that I am recollecting, Father Beale stood at the front of the sanctuary to the gospel. He announced: ‘The Holy Gospel is written in the 4th chapter of Luke beginning at the 1st verse’, and I accompanied the congregational response: ‘Praise be to thee, O Christ’ and then he read this passage for the first Sunday in Lent. I was all set to accompany the congregation as they responded at the conclusion of the passage: ‘Thanks be to thee, O Lord.’ Unfortunately, I was slightly premature and I struck up with me a loud chord before the good vicar had read this crucial last line in Luke’s gospel. So, as he paused, for dramatic effect after Jesus’ reply to the third temptation (in the particular translation he was reading): ‘It has been said, “You are not to put the Lord your God to the test.”’, I crashed in and then, he continued: ‘So, having come to the end of all his temptations, the devil departed, biding his time.’ Though I was embarrassed, I also thought it was humorously appropriate. It was rather like incidental music in a horror movie: ‘Doom, do, doom, doom, doom.’ ‘And the devil departed, biding his time.’ In some ways, I believe, my mistake, actually added to the sense of foreboding that Luke

provides with this unique line. Luke is clearly saying that the temptations for Jesus to depart from God's will for his life are not over after these 40 days in the wilderness. The tempter/tester will return, especially as Jesus approaches the end of his life. There is, in particular a link between the beginning and end of Lent, between the temptations and the cross.

And what about the tempter's work in earlier generations? Let's think now of some of the temptations faced by Jesus' ancestors in the Holy Land. We know from the Old Testament that a repeated temptation was to forget their dependence on God. Who brought the people into the land flowing with milk and honey? Not Moses. According to Deuteronomy, not any human hero, but God alone. 'The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm ... and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.' (Dt. 26:9) What is the response of each member of God's people? In our passage, it is worded: 'So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.' This first fruit has to be placed on the altar. It is to provide the material of the feast of rejoicing before the LORD God in which the priest and other marginalized citizens are to share (Dt. 26:11). As our passage put it: 'You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.' I am always so pleased these days when the resident aliens get a mention, as that it precisely my status in this country. – not that I am marginalized in the way that resident aliens were in the Holy Land at the time of the Deuteronomist. But for all of us, resident aliens or citizens of a particular country, the point is being made that all we enjoy is entirely a gift from God.

You may immediately respond: 'Well, no, what I enjoy in this land is due in no small measure to my hard work, my foresight and planning, my long hours of industry.' Of course, this also is true and the book of Deuteronomy does not underestimate the importance of our efforts. But the point of our Deuteronomy passage this morning is to set our whole physical and material life in the context of a relationship with God, to recognize that all our efforts are simply our response to the opportunities that God has afforded us. Jesus repeatedly taught that from those to whom much is given, much is required: financially and in every other way. 'Nothing but the best' is a fitting offering. What do you think is our equivalent to 'the first fruits'? Could it be the first check written from those who have an income? Whatever the first fruits are, they are definitely not the leftovers – of anything. The first fruits of the harvest are the best.

In our Adult Crossings Bible Study, we are looking at the great narratives of our faith. This morning's OT passage gives us a summary of Israel's story. 'When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, you shall make this response before the LORD your God.' These are not just words to be recited but they are to come from the heart, to be expressive of the worshipper's whole attitude to life. And what are these words? 'A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; (he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.'(verse 5)

Who was this 'wandering/homeless Aramean'? Most probably it was Jacob, who was renamed Israel. Aramea was northern Syria, but, in our passage, the wandering Aramean is not named, probably intentionally to show that the entire nation was at one time without a land. The emphasis of the passage is on the point that the ancestor possessed no land of his own. Maybe 'wandering' also suggested going astray (like roaming livestock). This echoes the insistence in the opening chapter of Deuteronomy on the total graciousness of God's election of Israel, a people without any merit whatsoever. As many of us read from Deuteronomy 7:7 (in last week's Adult Crossings Bible Study), God chose his people entirely out of his love. The same is true for us as Christians. The point is, both for the ancient Israelites and for ourselves, that we are who we are and we enjoy what we enjoy by virtue of being God's people. Possession of land, constitutional government, and family ties of kinship each contributed one part to making the land of Israel what it was. Possession of land, constitutional government, and family ties of kinship each contribute one part to making America what it is. However, as we interpret these Scriptures as Christians, we are saying that what is most important of all is the covenant with God which binds all these features together and defines us as a community of God. Otherwise, we, the church, are no more than a club. There is nothing wrong with a club and what it gives to its members. But the church is so much more than this. Its members are promised salvation, God's saving and healing power. This understanding of a divine promise underpinned Israel's capacity to survive the disasters of losing her land and political independence. Such an understanding of a divine purpose enables us as Christians to survive the loss of physical and material comforts 'our milk and honey'. For we know that our relationship with God is not dependent on any of these. Our faith, like that of the ancient Israelites, is based on the narrative of saving events.

The first fruits are the product of the land, which God had given to Israel in which to live out obedient living to God. Our first fruits, whatever form they take, are the product of the material world God has given us in which to live out our obedient living. The people of Israel were given the land to 'possess' and 'settle' but this did not mean that Israel owned the land. So, at harvest time, the worshipper was to return to God the 'first of all the fruit of the ground'. The ground still belonged to God. He was the true owner. The same is true for us. Our universe, our planet, our continent, our country, our state, our county, our city, even our house is only on loan from God for us to live our lives in. This is the biblical perspective. The Son of Man voluntarily became homeless for the duration of his ministry. You and I may not be called to follow Jesus in physically giving up our home. But, and Lent is a reminder of this serious giving up, we may be called to give up our possessive attitudes and to celebrate anything and everything we possess as a gift from God. If this is deep down our attitude to all that we have and are, then we might make some progress in accepting 'the wandering Aramean' as our true ancestor. We may be worthy descendants in offering our first fruits, in writing the first check from whatever income we have, to the church. We may remember our past, all those who have enabled us to become part of the people of God by the generosity of their work and their witness. We may, not out of obligation, but out of deep thankfulness, offer God each day 'nothing but the best'.

This passage from Deuteronomy has much to teach us as Christians especially on this first Sunday in Lent. I wonder too if you realize the importance of the Book of Deuteronomy for Jesus. In answer to each of his temptations, it is the Book of Deuteronomy that Jesus quotes from. Have you ever asked yourself what the church is all about? What's in all this religion-business for me? What was in it for Jesus? Certainly no home, no paycheck, no security or approval– or at least none that enabled him not to get crucified. What was in it for Jesus? One thing and one thing only: God. What did Jesus come to do? Did he come to start a new religion? No. Did he come to found the church? No. Did he come to feed the hungry? No. Did he come to rule the world with justice? No. Did he come to serve God faithfully? No. But you may be objecting to these replies. I thought Jesus did start a new religion. I thought Jesus did found the church. I thought Jesus did feed the hungry. I thought Jesus did bring justice and serve God faithfully. The results of Jesus' ministry may have entailed all these consequences, but none of them in itself gives the purpose of Jesus' ministry.

Have you ever thought about this? All the temptations offered to Jesus in the wilderness were to do good things: feed the hungry, rule the world with justice, and serve God faithfully. Even the devil quotes Scripture in the third temptation, where the psalmist promises protection to those who are righteous. I think the story of Jesus' temptations should prompt us to ask the fundamental question: what was it all for – Jesus' ministry? And what is it all for – the church?

It is to enable people to live according to God's rule. This is what Jesus meant in all his teaching about the kingdom of God, called in Matthew's gospel the kingdom of heaven. This means the kingship of God, that is, living according to God's rule. Being part of God's kingdom means fulfilling his purpose for us and for the whole world. Does this include feeding the hungry? Yes, it does, as when Jesus fed the hungry multitudes and when we provide food for our food pantry? But Jesus was not primarily a social worker and nor does the church exist primarily for this. As the ancient Israelites realized, caring for those in need is a part of what it means to promote God's rule. We don't build the kingdom of God, but we participate in it. This is what gives us our unique identity as the people of God. Just like those offering their first fruits as the descendants of a wandering Aramean, so we have not deserved or in any way initiated a relationship with God. It is all God's choice that we are given the opportunity to be part of his people. But we, just like the ancient Israelites, do have choice to make and actions to accomplish. These choices, like Jesus' throughout his ministry, must be appropriate to God's election of us. Jesus died, as he lived, in intimate relationship with God, his Father. To live in intimate relationship with God our Father is the point of it all. The season of Lent affords us a great opportunity to give up all the thoughts and actions which betray this relationship. Lent gives us another chance to cultivate all the thoughts and actions, which deepen our relationship with God. God, in Jesus, has given us nothing but the best. He asks nothing but the best from us in return.

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