

2. Discipleship: In the Steps of Jesus

The presentation in Birmingham Cathedral will look at aspects of Discipleship, looking at Luke's the passage in Luke's Gospel under the following headings:

- A. Jesus the pioneering leader: confronting the issues (based on Luke 4:1-8)
- B. Jesus the dying Messiah: carrying the cross (based on Luke 9: 18-27)
- C. Jesus the Living Instructor: passing on his truth (based on Luke 24).

Those unable to attend the presentation are encouraged to meet in small groups to discuss one or more of these passages. Here some starter questions are offered for A and C.

A. Luke 4:1-8

An extract has been supplied from Peter Walker's book *In the Steps of Jesus* (LionHudson, 2007), which looks at the significance of the Judean desert in Jesus' life and ministry. Small group members are encouraged to have read this through beforehand as a useful background to then studying the Gospel account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness.

Questions

Some questions which then arise may include the following:

1. *How important had the desert been in the earlier history of God's people? What episodes in the Old Testament are set in the desert and what had God's people learnt about God and themselves through those times?*
2. *Is there any significance in both John the Baptist and Jesus beginning their ministry with a period in the desert (3:3-6; 4:1-8)? And in Jesus being in the desert 'for 40 days' (4:2)?*
3. *Jesus quotes from the book of Deuteronomy*

frequently. What do we learn from this both about the way Jesus saw himself and also about his commitment to Scripture?

4. *'Jesus is going into God that he may then go out into his ministry with and for God' (ISJ p. 43). How important was this desert episode for Jesus' later ministry?*
5. *He was also confronting evil 'head-on'. Why was this important at the start of his ministry? What might have happened to his whole ministry if he had not won the victory at this point?*
6. *As Jesus' disciples today, what can we learn from this episode in Jesus' life? Yes, there are several things here which are unique to Jesus (e.g. the questions about his divine 'sonship'), but there also patterns which we may need to follow. For example:*
 - *In what ways do we need to become more secure in our identity as God's children? (v. 3)?*
 - *When some of our 'creature comforts' are taken away, what do we discover about what is really driving and motivating us? Are we seeking God's glory or our own?*
 - *What are the particular 'evils' in our own lives which we need to face up to this Lent and ask God for his help?*

C. Luke 24

In the evening teaching in the cathedral Peter Walker will be opening up six key themes which can be found in this important final chapter of Luke's Gospel. He will be suggesting that these six topics reveal what the Risen Christ would wish his followers to focus on in their journey of discipleship. If we focus on these things we will be following Jesus' way—the way in which he intends.

For further details, please consider looking at Peter's

book *The Jesus Way* (chapters 1-6). Here now are some possible starter-questions for those meeting in small groups.

1. The Resurrection

- *What truths about the resurrection does Luke teach us in this chapter (vv. 1-12, 22-24, 46)?*
- *How important is it to believe in the bodily raising of Jesus from the tomb?*
- *If Christ is indeed alive today, what difference will this make for the way in which we follow him today?*

2. The Cross

- *What truths about Jesus' death does Luke teach us in this chapter (vv. 7, 20, 26, 39, 46)?*
- *What do we think the Risen Christ meant when he spoke about his suffering being 'necessary' (vv. 26, 46; see also v. 45)?*
- *What is the link between Jesus' death and the 'forgiveness of sins' which can now be confidently preached in his name (v. 47)?*

3. The Holy Spirit

- *Jesus' final, climactic words (v. 49) focus on a new reality which will be essential for his disciples in the future—the gift of the Holy Spirit (as described later in Acts 2). What is significant about the way in which Jesus here describes the Spirit?*
- *Is there any link between Jesus' talking about their needing to be his 'witnesses' (v. 48) and his insistence that they wait for the gift of the Spirit (v. 49)?*
- *How important is the reality of the Spirit for those of us who are seeking to be Jesus' disciples today?*

4. The Scriptures

- *Luke 24 includes a unique Bible Study as the Risen Christ 'opens the scriptures' (v. 27, 45). What do we learn from this about Jesus' own attitude towards the Old Testament?*

- *Can we think of some passages within the Old Testament which Jesus may have referred to when showing how the scriptures point forward to himself (vv. 26-27, 44-46)? And, in particular, that he would be raised 'on the third day'?*
- *If the Risen Christ is emphasizing the importance of Scripture (now we have the resurrection, we evidently cannot suddenly start dismissing the need for this ancient text), how should his disciples today value the scriptures?*

5. The Lord's Supper

- *The moment of recognition for the Emmaus disciples was when Jesus 'broke bread' (vv. 30-31, 35). How significant do you think this was for Luke as he related this story?*
- *What previous 'breakings of bread' had Jesus done which might have helped the disciples recognise him at this moment (see e.g. Luke 22:14-23; also John 6)?*
- *How important is it for Jesus' disciples today to participate in this meal? In what ways can we expect this to be an occasion when we will 'recognise' Jesus and meet with him in a special way?*

6. The Call to Mission

- *Luke 24:47-8 is Luke's equivalent of the Great Commission (in Matt. 28; cf. also Acts 1:8). Why does Jesus emphasize the importance of mission at this time? What would have happened if the disciples had not gone out from Jerusalem in Jesus' name?*
- *How is the Gospel message summarised by Jesus in v. 47? Are there other things we think should be added to this pithy summary?*
- *In what ways can Jesus' disciples today go out into 'all nations'?*

Conclusion

- *Looking back over these six themes, what are some*

of the interesting 'balances' which you notice?

- *Individual Christians (and local churches too) may often focus on one of these truths to the detriment of others. Is there one of these 6 areas which you or your church might usefully focus on in a new way?*

Chapter 4 The Judean Desert

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.' Jesus answered, 'It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone.'

The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, 'I will give you all their authority and splendour, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours.' Jesus answered, 'It is written: "Worship the Lord your God and serve him only." '

The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 'If you are the Son of God,' he said, 'throw yourself down from here. For it is written:

"He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone." '
Jesus answered, 'It says: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'

When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

Luke 4:1--13

Testing in the Wilderness

The Judean desert is a lonely, inhospitable place. So it was a strange place for Jesus to go to immediately after his baptism in the River Jordan. Why did he not start his public ministry straightaway? Jesus had a different priority: time alone with his God, a deliberate resolve to face those temptations that would hover around him in that public ministry. The story may seem strange to our ears, but the secret 'success' and power of his later work, so the gospel writers claim, originated here.

Features of the desert

In geographical terms the ancient land of Israel was in many ways quite remarkable. Unlike its neighbouring countries, which were predominantly made up of arid deserts, Israel was a small, fertile stretch of land that benefited from the rain blown in from the Mediterranean. The Old Testament describes it as a 'land flowing with milk and honey' (Deuteronomy 6:3). Certainly the Israelites, on entering the Land, would have noted a key contrast with the land of Egypt where they had been slaves: this was a land where water not only was found in rivers (like the Nile and the Jordan) but also fell from the sky.

Yet this is only true for the western side of the land. Running down the centre of the country is a spine of hills that causes the land to the east to fall effectively into a 'rain shadow'. This is the Judean desert into which Jesus went after his baptism in the Jordan.

It is a place of austere beauty and an almost deafening silence; a place where human beings are acutely conscious of their frailty and utter dependence on water for brute survival. And yet in biblical times it was also a place where people went to find solitude and space, to hear the voice of God addressing them above the cacophony of other competing demands and voices. John the Baptist had begun his ministry here, 'a voice of one calling in the desert' (Isaiah 40:3). It was now the place to which Jesus naturally turned as he sought to forge his own ministry on the words of God.

The desert in the Old Testament

As Jesus went into the desert he would have been aware of all that the desert had come to signify in the experience of God's people up to that point.

Israel had been forged as a nation by its experience in the 'wilderness': forty years of wandering in the Sinai and Negev deserts *en route* from Egypt to the Promised Land. This had been the time for receiving God's Law (including the Ten Commandments), a time of testing, preparation and trusting in God's provision (the gift of 'manna' and water from the rocks). Yet it was also the time when the Israelites 'grumbled' against God which they would later look back as a period of disobedience to their Redeemer God: 'Today, if you hear his voice', the Psalmist later exhorted them, 'do not harden your hearts as you did... in the desert, where you fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did. ... 'They are a people whose hearts go astray'' (Psalm 95:7--10). Later generations were supposed to learn the lessons of the desert: Trust in God, not in yourself, and listen to his Word.

The desert also features quite frequently later in the Old Testament. Sometimes it is the place of escape and refuge, as in the case of the young David on the run from King Saul. Sometimes it is the place of recovery and recuperation, as in the case of the exhausted Elijah. After his encounters with the prophets of Baal Elijah 'was afraid and ran for his life', going southwards beyond Beersheba into the Negev desert. Once there he was reinvigorated by hearing the gentle whisper' of God's Word -- or, as the old versions say, a 'still, small voice'.

It is also the place of prophecy and expectation, and of looking forward to what God would do for his people after they had gone into exile. When the prophet Isaiah announces his message of 'comfort', he sees this new work of God as strangely linked to the desert:

Comfort, comfort, my people...

'A voice of one calling, 'in the desert prepare the way for the Lord;
make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God...

The rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.

And the glory of the Lord will be revealed...

'All men are like grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God stand for ever.' ...

You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem ...

say to the towns of Judah, 'Here is your God!'

(Isaiah 40:1-9)

Just as in the time of the Exodus God had used the desert to teach his people, so now, when he moves to restore them from their place of exile, the desert would be involved. There is 'good news'; there are dramatic events as God's people return from exile through the desert; there is a fresh recognition of God's powerful Word; above all, the desert is to be the place of preparation for the arrival of the Lord himself -- 'Here is your God!'

Now we begin to sense the rich, biblical resonances 'when the word of God came to John in the *desert*'. 'He went into all the country around the Jordan', we read, 'preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (Luke 3:2-3). In other words, just as Isaiah prophesied, the exile caused by God's judgment on sin is now at last coming to an end. And, just as Isaiah had seen this as preparation for the arrival of the Lord himself, so now John warns clearly: 'One more powerful than I will come' (Luke 3:16).

There are similarly powerful resonances when Jesus himself then goes into the desert. Like David, he is a new king 'in the making', having to face off his enemies. Like Elijah, he is a new prophet needing reassurance at the start of a demanding ministry that he is truly speaking

for God. Above all, just as Israel as a nation spent ‘forty years’ in the desert, so Jesus now spends ‘forty days’ in the wilderness of Judea -- this time not to grumble against God but to trust in his Word, thereby succeeding where Israel had failed.

Luke’s account corroborates the parallel between Jesus’ story and the ancient story of Israel by reporting that Jesus quoted from the early chapters of Deuteronomy no less than three times (Luke 4: 4, 8, 12). These key passages had been given to the Israelites at a critical juncture before they entered the Promised Land: would Israel be a faithful ‘son’ in the service of God? Now Jesus, in preparing for the ‘promised land’ of his own ministry, is meditating on what it means to be a faithful Israelite, a true Israel. How can he ensure he proves faithful where they proved faithless?

There is also the fascinating possibility that the order of the three temptations mirrors something of Israel’s journey into the Promised Land: first the Israelites grumbling in the desert about their food; then Moses climbing Mount Nebo from where he could glimpse the land of promise; and then their eventual establishment of Jerusalem and its temple as the place for divine worship. In a similar way Jesus is now tempted first by desire for bread, then he is led up to a ‘high place’ where he is ‘shown all the kingdoms of the world’, and finally he is brought to Jerusalem’s Temple pinnacle. We are being given clear signals that redemption’s story is being repeated, entering its critical moment of fulfilment, and that the outcome of the story rests squarely on the shoulders of this one called Jesus.

Prayer and solitude

So Jesus goes off alone, away from the crowds. Throughout Luke’s Gospel Jesus often slips away to escape from the crowds and to get some time alone to pray. Jesus was a man of prayer, someone who sought appropriate solitude so that his relationship with God remained uppermost and his vision of God fresh.

By going out into the desert now, Jesus is underlining the absolute priority of God in his life and ministry. He is acknowledging the true source of his own power and authority. He is going *into* God that he may then go out into his ministry *with* and *for* God. Not surprisingly we note immediately after this that he ‘returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit’ (Luke 4:14). Luke asserts that he had gone into the desert earlier ‘full of the Holy Spirit’ (Luke 4:1), but now that *fullness* of the Spirit has been transformed into true *power* through the lens of prayer and focused solitude.

There are lessons here that have inspired Jesus’ followers ever since: the value of fasting at key junctures in life; the use of scripture in times of testing; the determination to find appropriate solitude before times of real exertion; the importance of preserving the integrity of one’s inner life so that it is of a piece with one’s public *persona*.

Combatting evil

There are lessons too about the reality of spiritual warfare. Although it may sound strange to our ears, the story of Jesus’ temptation is portrayed as a battle with a personal source of evil, described by the gospel writers as the ‘devil’. This Evil One is threatened by the manifestation of the One who is ‘Son of God’. He relentlessly challenges this supposed identity (‘if you are the Son of God’), perhaps aware that sowing confusion about a person’s God-given identity can be one of the most effective means of undermining their subsequent actions for good. He tries to twist the meaning of scripture. He also falsely claims to be the one with authority over the ‘kingdoms of the world’, thereby usurping the authority of God himself.

Jesus' answers are blunt and direct, giving no quarter to the devil. He parries the falsehoods with straight quotations from scripture ('It is written...'). He will not let God's Word be twisted or distorted. If scripture is being wrongly used, he will not abandon it, but rather will use it more truly and more deeply. If the devil wants to be worshipped, Jesus will offer worship to God alone and preserve his own total obedience to the Lord his God. There is profound irony here. For, although of all human beings Jesus alone would in time be seen as the One who was himself worthy of worship, at this stage Jesus remains resolutely under God's authority—not letting the Evil One come subtly between himself and his Father, not letting his own right to be worshipped be twisted by the devil's false claim to have that right.

We are touching here on things beyond the borders of language. Behind their artful simplicity the gospel writers are hinting at a whole mysterious depth to the ministry of Jesus that a superficial eye might miss. At this juncture in the story one might even sense that the very nature of God is being put under attack. Certainly the whole success of Jesus' mission seems to hang in the balance.

But the moment passes. Jesus' resolution holds firm. He will not be swayed. He will not abuse the spiritual power and authority that God has truly given him. He will not 'fall' and go over to the 'dark side'. This One, sent by God with his power and authority, will prove true, and will see his vocation through to the bitter end.

The essential battle has been won, and, although the devil leaves him only until another 'opportune time', the outcome of those later skirmishes has already been determined. Even in the agony leading up to the Cross, when the temptation to seek an alternative route to glory will be so powerful and when the powers of evil are reaching their fiercest and darkest, this Jesus will prove true.

Life in the place of death

So the shadow of the Cross falls strangely forwards into the desert. In this sense, the desert becomes the unexpected place where the great victory was accomplished. This 'desert campaign' proves decisive in the war. The desert thereby becomes paradoxically, not a place of death and fatality, but rather the place of life and the seedbed of hope. Jesus goes down deep enough to transform the dry and dusty desert into a place of utmost beauty.

And this is something that his followers can treasure when they face their own, smaller but still frightening, deserts. For, following Jesus' lead, they may be able to fulfil the picture in Psalm 84:

'Blessed are those whose strength is in you;
as they pass through the desert valley,
they make it a place of springs.'
(Psalm 84:5)