

One Sunday afternoon about a month or so ago I think I had a wee test!

Not quite in a Middle-Eastern desert, I was in the Gallagher Retail Park. Whilst there I thought I would pop in to M&S for a couple of things. Those of you who are there regularly will know that very often on the corner before you turn to go to M&S a homeless person will often sit. This was the case on this day, and I was wearing my collar. The white bit of plastic around my neck that tells people, among other things, that I am available. That I will stop if they want to talk.

But I was in a rush and did not have time to stop and talk so, thinking I was being very clever I zipped up my jacket over my collar so it didn't show. Sorted I thought! Not so said God. For it was rather icy and just at the very moment that I was passing

the chap I slipped spectacularly, landing, very ungraciously, flat on my bottom right at his feet. And he was the one who was gracious and generous to me - getting on his feet, giving me a hand up and making sure I was okay.

I was less embarrassed about the fall of itself - I'm used to having the coordination of Bambi on ice - and felt far more of a recognition that I'd just tried to hide the very visible sign of my discipleship - my commitment to follow Jesus in the way he has called me to try to save perhaps a couple of minutes of my time.

Thanks God! I thought. Roxanne the terrible disciple fails another test! It's a recurring theme in discipleship - we are all tested, and none of us are Jesus Christ - we are tested and often we fail. And the important thing is not usually if we pass or fail - God loves us anyway - but what do we learn from our tests? What do we do differently in future?

At the start of Lent we are presented with the story of how Jesus was tested in the desert. Three tests.

Firstly Jesus is tempted to grasp after immediate personal gratification. Famished after a period of fasting, in solitary confinement and in the harsh conditions of the desert, the tempter finds Jesus and goes straight for the kill! Turn these stones into bread! Who could blame a probably very hungry Jesus if he had fallen - magicked up some bread and satisfied his hunger?

It's a temptation that we all face on a daily basis. We have lost the art of waiting. Instant personal gratification is the way of the world. Not just material gratification, but emotional gratification. We want our own way and we want it now. For things to be just so, just how we personally would like them. As well as becoming worse at waiting we aren't good at accepting

that the world does not revolve around ourselves and our immediate personal preferences. And we can become quite manipulative when we have to wait, or we don't get exactly what we want when we want it.

We're so used to instant gratification - to getting our own way - to our ego being satisfied - that we waste so much time and energy on that which is unimportant. On arguments about things that will not matter in a months time, a years time, five years time. Rather than stepping back and asking ourselves what really matters in a situation - indeed if any of what is bothering us matters really at all, we get so wound up about getting our own way. Imagine what a difference we could make if we could step back from all of this and invest our energy, time and emotion in the things that really matter - standing against injustice. Prayer. Our wholistic wellbeing and the wellbeing of others rather than our instant gratification.

Jesus answers the Devil - man does not live by bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. We should not live lives which are entirely controlled by our instant gratification but lives that are grounded in living out the will and word of God.

Secondly Jesus is faced with the temptation to throw himself off the highest part of the temple so that the angels will come and rescue him. The temptation to do something sensational, dramatic to attract the angels to come and demonstrate to him how loved and important he is - he will not be allowed to fall.

We see this temptation played out in the world around us all of the time. Celebrities do sensational things to gain media coverage. Arguments between high profile people are played out on social media and through the press so one or the other received public support and validation.

But I think in our own less high-profile lives this is a difficult one too. I believe the deepest desire of the human heart is to be loved and to be valued and validated.

But the human love and validation we so often seek after is imperfect. It is frail and fragile and so easily bruised and bruising. It never truly satisfies. When our self worth rests completely upon the approval of others we never know just how much we are loved.

Jesus, knowing that he is God's beloved son, secure in that identity, refuses to test the limits of his worth. As disciples, as followers of Jesus, we know that we are loved unconditionally. Each week at the start of the service we hear the words God IS love and we are God's children. As disciples we are bound to take God's love seriously. To accept that we are loved and valued. Unconditionally. Not simply for who we are, but very often despite who we are.

It makes no sense to test the limits of God's love for us because there is no limit to God's love. In the knowledge that we are God's beloved sons and daughters we should not try to test the limits of our worth - behaving in a way that tries to seek the validation or approval of others. Rather we should live and behave in a way that reflects our belovedness. We can be bold because we are beloved. We can be confident because we are beloved. We can be gracious and generous because we are beloved. We can take the risk of loving another person because we are beloved by God. It's that security in our identity as God's children that will enable us to change the world.

Thirdly Jesus faces a temptation to secure the glory of political leadership. To use what he has been given to gain earthly power. It's easy to see this as a temptation that does not really affect us - to project it on to political and world leaders. But it is

not a temptation that is limited to those who sit in high office. It's a temptation we face every day. To be in control of things - to have our own little bit of power at work, at school, at home, at Church. The worship of the self. The self perception that we are right and other people are a means to our own end - to be criticised, manipulated and controlled to our own ends.

But that is not what power is about. Despite what we may be left thinking by the news, or the actions of world leaders power is not a bad thing. All true power comes from God. Power, well and wisely used, is a good thing - a tool that helps others and ourselves to flourish - something that can be used for the Glory of God. And so we should ask ourselves, whenever we exercise any kind of power - who does this serve?

In the three temptations of Jesus in today's Gospel are three lessons that we could take for Lent this year, and beyond that. Questions we can ask of our lives and our discipleship:

Firstly - Do we seek out quick self-gratification in our lives and relationships with others, do we let ourselves be pulled into wasting emotion and energy on things that do not matter to satisfy our ego or do we direct our emotion and energy in positive ways?

Secondly - Do we grandstand or perform or manipulate to try to get others to show us how much they love us, or are we secure in our identity trusting that we are loved just we are as sons and daughters of God?

Thirdly - Do we use whatever power we have for our own ends or in a corrupt way or do we exercise our power to enable and encourage others and point them to God, who is the source of all power.

Like Roxanne the terrible disciple, hiding from a homeless person, we won't always pass the tests, and our actions won't always live up to the standards we are called to. But only if we can ask these questions of ourselves and admit when we fail then can we then learn from our actions and do better in the future through the mercy and grace of God..

Amen