

## **'How a kiss shows there's more to life than power'**

Sermon on Jesus tempted in the wilderness for Lent 1 2014 by Mark Pilgrim

In Dostoevsky's novel 'The Brothers Karamazov' Alexei, who is a monk, and his worldly-wise, sceptical brother Ivan are in passionate conversation. To express his critique of the Church to his monk brother, Ivan tells this story:

During the Spanish Inquisition in the 1500's, the Spanish Roman Catholic Church put on trial and tortured all those that disagreed with them. At the height of the Inquisition Christ appears in a Spanish town. As he walks through the streets, the people gather about him, staring. Christ begins to heal the sick, but a powerful cardinal intervenes and orders his arrest. Late that night, this cardinal, the Grand Inquisitor, visits Christ in his cell. He begins to explain why he has taken him prisoner and why he cannot allow Christ to perform his works. Throughout the Grand Inquisitor's lecture, Christ simply listens silently.

Why can't the Grand Inquisitor allow Jesus to do his work on Earth? Because his work is at odds with the work of the Church. The Inquisitor reminds Christ of the time, in Matthew's Gospel, when the Devil presented him with three temptations, each of which Christ rejects. The Grand Inquisitor says that by rejecting these three temptations, Jesus highlights the power and importance of human free will. But, says the Grand Inquisitor, free will is too big a burden for mankind to handle. Though Christ gives humanity complete freedom whether or not to follow him, no one is strong enough to be truly faithful. The Church's line, the Grand Inquisitor states, is that those who are not go to Hell and are damned forever. Christ, he says, should have given people no choice. He says Christ should have accepted the power the Devil offered and given the world security rather than freedom. That way people would have had happiness and security on Earth, rather than the impossible burden of moral freedom. The Grand Inquisitor says that, in the Inquisition, the Church is correcting Christ's mistake. The Church is taking away freedom of choice and replacing it with security. So, the Grand Inquisitor says, he must keep Christ in prison. If Christ were allowed to go free, he would undermine the Church's work to lift the burden of free will from mankind.

The first temptation, remember, concerns bread. Hungry after forty days of fasting, Christ is told by Satan that if he really is the son of God, he can turn a stone to bread and satisfy his hunger. Christ refuses, replying that man should not live by bread, but by the word of God. The Grand Inquisitor says that most people are too weak to live by the word of God when they are hungry. Christ should have taken the bread and offered mankind freedom from hunger instead of freedom of choice.

The second temptation is to perform a miracle. Satan places Christ on the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem and tells him to prove he was the messiah by throwing himself off. If Christ were really God's son, angels would come down and not allow him to die. Christ refuses, telling Satan that he cannot tempt God. Beaten, Satan departs. But the Grand Inquisitor says that Christ should have given people a miracle: most people, he says, need to see the miraculous in order to be content in their religious faith. Man needs a supernatural being to worship, and Christ refuses to appear as one.

The third temptation concerns power. Satan shows Christ all the kingdoms in the world, and offers him control of them all. Christ refuses. The Grand Inquisitor says Christ should have taken the power. Since he did not, the Church has now had to take it in his name so that people can live in security.

The Grand Inquisitor tells Christ that it was Satan, not Christ, who was right during the Temptations. He says that ever since the 300's and Constantine's time when the Church took over the Roman Empire, it has been secretly performing the work of Satan. This is not because it is evil. No – not at all. It is simply because it seeks the greatest security for mankind.

As the Grand Inquisitor finishes his indictment of Christ, Christ simply walks up to the old man and kisses him gently on the lips. At this the Grand Inquisitor suddenly sets Christ free, but tells him never to return again.

As Ivan finishes his story, he worries that Alexei will be disturbed at the thought that, without God, there are no moral limitations on man's behaviour. But Alexei leans forward and himself kisses Ivan on the lips. What is he doing? Why does he do it? Visibly moved, Ivan recognises Alexei is simply following Jesus' example. The two brothers then go their separate ways.

What searches for security, I wonder, are you and I in thrall to? What security do we idolise – at the expense of being faithful to God's call in Christ?

Are we obsessed with having food – and particularly certain types or quality of food – in our cupboards and on our tables? My wife regrets my obsession with seeded granary bread – and I similarly tease her for an obsession with Jacob's Cornish Wafers – price 94p when Water Biscuits are 40p! Doesn't Jesus invite us to thank God for all the food he provides and then focus really intently on bread of a different sort, the Bread of Heaven, God made known - as in this service - in the bread of Holy Communion?

Or, in relation to the second temptation, are we inclined not to follow Christ wholeheartedly until we have seen or experienced some miraculous evidence of God's power? Are we waiting for a miraculous cure for someone we love before we fully believe? Are we looking for a miraculous change of attitude or mind in someone we find difficult before we are willing to commit to God as revealed in Christ? If so, look at Jesus' response. Rather than be the subject of a miraculous rescue to reveal his power, Jesus is content to be the object of people's scorn and incomprehension. He reveals his power through his ability to suffer death innocently on the cross.

Or, in relation to the third temptation, are we obsessed with keeping control over groups we belong to and are comfortable with – as Satan invited Jesus to have control over the nations of the world? Is it more important, for instance, here at St Peter's, that the congregation we are familiar with should stay together and not be disrupted – or that some members of the congregation be free, able and encouraged to start another congregation at a different time and with a different style to the familiar one – in order that God's kingdom might grow rather than remain static or decline?

In the end the tension between freedom and security highlighted by Dostoevsky in his fable of the Grand Inquisitor is as much yours and mine as it was Ivan's and Alexei's. The temptation – as with Satan and the Grand Inquisitor - is to go for security. But don't both the gospel and the novel suggest that the path to true salvation is the rocky, risky one of exercising human free will in God's service rather than be swayed and beguiled by offers of security and 'other people knowing best'?

I am sure that, when we fail to follow Christ, as fail we must, God exercises his freedom to forgive our lapses. God restores us with a kiss similar to that of Alexei for Ivan and of Christ for the Inquisitor.

Let's pray:

Gracious God, inspire and strengthen us to exercise your gift of free will in your service. In our frailty and fragility, may our lives be transformed through following Christ in love and service now and always. Amen.