

Probably the most famous book to have come out of these parishes is on fishing. *Where the Bright Waters Meet*, by Harry Plunket Greene published in 1924. It is lyrical about the joys and challenges of fly-fishing and very informative about social life in Hurstbourne Priors where Harry was living in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The book is both wistful and cheerful at the same time: villages were changing, his own fishing syndicate had unadvisedly, as it turned out, overstocked the Bourne, and the rain-water run-off from the newly tarmacked roads was beginning to poison the fish. But with his chums, Harry is clearly very popular and great fun. A great story-teller with a fast-flowing river of amusing anecdotes. As it happened, his family life at the time of writing the book was turbulent and unhappy, the best years of his singing career were long past.

Fishing and fun. The life of a gentleman fly-fisher on the River Bourne is obviously very different from that of one who fished for his living on the Sea of Galilee – though the personal qualities needed are much the same. Persistence, acute observation of nature, understanding of fish behaviour, wily, blessed with good luck, an economy and beauty of movement, the ability to keep up cheerful hope during hours of waiting. You must be alert for the one chance which will eventually come your way. Along comes the Teacher. [Mat 4:19] *And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."* (The old words catch the challenge so much better: the *fishing for people* of the new translations sounds simply dull.) But look closer. It doesn't actually say, *Follow*: there's no verb, it's more like, *Over here! Behind me!* They are hooked on a much sharper barb. I think we know when we are in the presence of a true leader. Jesus has hardly said anything, but somehow he has conveyed his vision and person so powerfully that Simon and Andrew are there behind him at once. Off they go into a very different kind of fishing.

What do we follow? The fortunes of a football team: a horse, cricket. The Stock Market (unhappy), or *Strictly Come Dancing*, success in both of them glamorous but fickle. *The Archers* or *Coronation Street*, we follow the soaps (strange phrase, if you think about it!). We follow

directions: recently for the first time I borrowed a satellite navigation – the lady's voice was very directive, but once ill-informed. We follow the crowd. Everyone has got one, so we better had too. We follow a line of enquiry. We might follow assembly instructions – we might not. Perhaps most of the time we are simply following, someone, something, some tradition, some idea, some habit. So, following the Master is not such a ridiculous thing as some make out. Following the Way, as he described himself, the Truth, the Life: the Light dawning in the darkness. We need to remember that he is always in touching distance. St Teresa of Avila warned her nuns, "*The whole mischief comes from our not really grasping the fact that He is near us, and imagining Him far away.*" (*The Way of Perfection*, p184) He is already in that situation we dread. He is always ahead of us in the game. His is a voice which is still imperative to listen for amid all those crying out for our attention. That's the really big difference for us now, sorting out the one essential voice to tune into from the many stations blaring out with this and that.

But his is a cheerful voice, bantering with fishermen casting a net into the Galilean Sea. His voice comes as new life, new challenge to them, but they will draw on their old skills in a different way, from the familiar into the new. *Over here! Behind me!* A voice nearer than we think, claiming not just our attention, but our life, our loyalty, our hope. Why was it Simon and Andrew he summoned to follow him? Why is it that some of us seem to know his calling with more clarity than others? I really don't know. What I do know is that we can hear that voice close and compelling, and be drawn to use the skills and knowledge that we have for the greater good of the Kingdom, rather than bettering ourselves. He's still so attractive, there's a beauty in his service, a light dawning with his presence. It's a summons to become little for him, rather than great for ourselves. *Over here!* says Jesus, *Behind me!* And the fishing adventure begins.

For the only time in our lifetime, Easter falls on 23<sup>rd</sup> March, less than three months from Christmas. Today, which we are celebrating as Candlemas, the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, is also the Sunday next before Lent. We move from white to purple is one go. From the panorama of this day, Christmas (7 weeks ago) and Easter (in 7 weeks time) are both in view together. The episode we heard read, Simeon and Anna, joins the two. They are a mature reflection on both the birth and death of the Saviour. Our need for a Saviour is wrapped up in our lack of peace. Christmas is the birth of the Prince of Peace: the first gift of Easter is peace through the Holy Spirit. If we are living with any sense of regret for the past, if we feel unfulfilled, or are fearful for the future, then we really do not yet know the peace of God which passes all understanding. Perhaps we have simply got so used to striving, being inwardly driven, worrying about the future, that we cannot even imagine what real peace is like, let alone attain it. Peace is salvation from all those things, and for salvation, to find true peace, we need one who sets us free. We need a Saviour.

When he picks up the baby in his arms, and recognises in the tiny Jesus the so longed-for Messiah, Simeon knows it is both the time of his fulfilment but also his being set aside in peace. The wistfully beautiful canticle sung in evening prayer and known by its first words in Latin, *Nunc dimittis*, has taken us far from the original setting. God now no longer needs Simeon as a watchman. He accept everything in that present moment. He has seen all he needs to see. Now his fulfilment is complete. The *now* is emphatic: it must be first. *Now, Lord, lettest thou thy servant depart in peace*, is a much better translation. What he has seen as he holds the baby is what he has prayed to see, expected to see, longed to see. Seeing the Saviour is the fulfilment of his life.

There's a depth of meaning in that one word *Now*. God is very much to do with the present moment. St Augustine mused a lot on this on this in his Confessions. *The past is over: the future yet to come. Neither exists now. But as we remember the past, or worry about the future, we do so now in the present. In the innermost place of our*

*humanity there exists no time – there is simply pure present. There God allows us to discover our true selves.* [BRF Guidelines Sep-Dec 2007 p113] Simeon has discovered that Now which is the meaning of all his life, that pivotal point where his past of waiting, and his future are completely balanced on the present moment of peace and revelation. *Simeon can breathe his Nunc Dimittis not because of his unblemished piety, not because of his sterling service to the Temple, not even because he has lived to see the consolation of Israel and the Lord's Messiah. Simeon knows that now he can at last go to God because he has seen God's salvation. Simeon is not saved by his sanctity but by his Saviour.* [CT 1 Feb 2008, John Pridmore]

Christmas is past, Easter is still to come, but now is always the time to experience the saviour: As St Paul put it, [Ro13.11] *now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed.* It does not depend on us, but instead upon the sheer great goodness and grace of God who sends us now a Saviour, Christ, our peace.

On this first Sunday of Lent, we think about evil and the tempter. In the Gospel reading he, and I think it is a 'he', is called variously the tempter, the devil, Satan. The nature of evil is one of the most fascinating and hard of all human questions: why is there evil at all? What is it? How is it that an ordinarily good family man, who loves his mother, hugs his children and is kind to cats, can in certain circumstances perform acts of appalling cruelty?

In a more local context, I can remember very vividly, even though it was 30 years ago, talking to the counsellor with whom I shared an office at one of the large Basingstoke Comprehensive schools. He was very upset about what a pupil had told him. It was like lifting up a rock and seeing all sorts of repulsive dark creatures crawling around underneath. He had wanted to drop the rock back immediately on whatever it was he had heard, but somehow it had left him feeling dirty, touched by evil. He was quite disturbed – unusual for a counsellor. That was just Basingstoke in the 1970s.

Three names are used of the evil one in the gospel reading. The tempter, the devil and Satan. Each reveals a different face of evil. The *tempter* hooks us with something attractive and lures us along a wrong path: he tests the reality of our goodness. The *devil* is from the Greek 'δαιμόνιον' diabolical, a slanderer, one who spreads lies against us. *Satan* is the enemy, the opposer, a Hebrew word. This is how it was for Jesus in the wilderness. The attack was probing his strengths at their weakest point, testing, lying, opposing what Jesus believed about his relationship to God. "If you are the Son of God..." How do you hold on to your faith when it is under systematic assault from what seems to be a relentless personal opponent? But we must crucially remember that evil does not really have the power it claims. Only God does. Evil is just a negative, a shadow, a parasite on goodness. There is no shadow without light, and when the light is brightest, the shadow is darkest.

The picture of temptation here is important. The tempter is outside Jesus. The temptation is an encounter. The wonderful film we viewed last year for the Lent Course, the best by far of the Gospel films,

Pasolini's *Gospel According to St Matthew*, had a dark, cloaked and hooded figure striding briskly across the desert landscape to meet Jesus who is kneeling alone. The encounter is brief but tense. The tempter soon departs recognising the spiritual strength of Jesus even when he is worn down by hunger. The Spirit enabled Jesus to read exactly what was happening in the critical encounter, and so see off the devil by speaking God's words.

But perhaps there is another way of thinking about evil. A century of psychology suggests that there is a real mixture of impulses within us, good and bad. We might think of temptation more as a voice within. This is even more worrying, I think, but a significant insight. This helps me understand why the school-counsellor was quite so disturbed. The evil he had heard touched something deep within him, good man that he was, a Quaker. But we always need to take God into account. And taking into account God we recognise that the evil within us does not need to be fed, we can spiritually discern the lying voice, and learn that the power of God to protect us from it is much greater than any evil. This year's Lent Course, sessions from the Beta course, draws on insights from the Bible and psychology to try to understand the deepest human problems just a little better.

A growing relationship with God is exactly what we need. Gradually through practice and habit we begin to make part of ourselves the strength of the faith. This is a network of Bible phrases, lines from hymns, psalms, great prayers we learn, like the Lord's Prayer, the evening collect. Something from here, something from there. In the ordinary day to day, it doesn't need to be drawn upon that much, but it does need to be exercised, like a muscle. But sometime, and we never know when, we may be called to draw upon that reserve of faith to its very limits, to carry us through a chameleon assault of evil in whatever way it comes, temptation, suffering, betrayal. What we know from Jesus' special experience is that it can both be recognised and overcome. There is a great strength and power in faith, especially if we can hold fast to the fact that we are God's beloved, children, sparks from the divine brilliance, brothers and sisters of Jesus who was tempted in every respect as we are, yet remained without sin.

I'm going to try to weave my chairman's report for the Annual Church Meeting into this sermon. As I do so, I'm very conscious that it is not always comfortable to ride two horses at the same time, especially if they begin to go in different directions. Painful to imagine.

On this sixth Sunday of the great extended Easter celebration which is the tradition of the Church, we hear as our gospel reading some words of Jesus spoken to his disciples on the night before he died. That night of course has resonated in the Church through the ages. Whenever, wherever, disciples gather to share communion, Eucharist, the story is told again. We fulfil his instruction to do this in remembrance of him. It's worth thinking about what the word 'this' could mean. Jesus issued very few commands. They are simple. Love one another; love your enemies; he affirmed two great commandments of the Old Testament, love God and love our neighbour; seek first God's kingdom; do this in remembrance of me; when you pray, say this, *Our Father ...*; and so on. Jesus' commands spiral around love and grace and compassion offered in every direction, towards God, to one another. He tells us what to do, but not how to do it in the situations we face. We are to be loving and compassionate with great imagination. When we take his commands to heart, the Spirit meets us more than half-way. Jesus promises his disciples in his place the Helper, Advocate, Counsellor, Comforter, Encourager – a Greek word which doesn't settle easily into English – the Spirit is never easily tied down. It is entirely about support. The spiritual presence or inner voice drawing us on to love beyond any power of our own, towards the love of Christ. Every church has to find its own imaginative answers to pour love and compassion into its community.

The informal Annual Report offers a snapshot of some aspects of the life of this church. I hope that you find it interesting reading, especially about the parts of St Peter's life in which you are not involved. But the limitation of any report is that it is more about what we have done less about what we are, and the spirit in which we act. This spirit is very important and much on a vicar's heart. It is nourished by our worship and prayerfulness, our compassion and love, our centring on Jesus. People find many reasons to give up on churches. There is only one

reason for staying: the gospel of Jesus Christ, and that is what we proclaim.

My first reflection is that there is much generosity here – both in the obvious monetary way, and in people sharing their musical, bell-ringing, teaching, flower-arranging and other gifts. It is a significant achievement for a small church to have paid fully our ever-rising contribution to the wider church through the Parish Share. Our youth and children's work is a great cause for thanksgiving. The choir and music has been inspirational, as were the great services of Easter and Christmas. We are very blessed with a good and very hard-working core of churchwardens, officers and councillors and others who give support and encouragement which is costly to them and moving. Mostly it is done with enjoyment as well. St Peter himself was not afraid to step in boldly even if he got it wrong. We can't take ourselves too seriously! There is continuing concern about ordinary Sundays, when there is no headline event to draw people here – just the sublime opportunity to stand out of our lives and offer our worship and gratitude to God. Something is not connecting up. If the ordinary cannot be sustained, will we be able to rise to the extraordinary?

As Nona prepares to retire today, there comes a change in our benefice life. We shall be very grateful for the ministries of Dodie and John Scott during the vacancy. Personally, I shall have to check and recheck the service programme even more carefully to see where I should be and when. We shall need wisdom in selecting Nona's successor. We pray also for Richard Sutcliffe as he prepares for the next stage in exploring his calling to ordained ministry, at a national selection conference at the end of next month. Whatever the decision, it's a demanding path ahead. But who else here is God pushing towards the boundaries of their comfort, that they may serve him in the calling to which they are called?

The words of a short poem/prayer of Dag Hammarskjöld:-

For all that has been — Thanks!  
To all that shall be — Yes!