

## Sermon: The Lord Jesus II 12<sup>th</sup> February 2006

Last week I asked you to use your imagination and try to get close to Jesus by picturing him in his meeting various people – Simon Peter, Mary Magdalene, the widow at Nain and so on. Well, here's another sermon on the same theme. Again I want us to use our imagination to draw close to Jesus by picturing him as he was when he was alone, or at least seemed to be alone.

Take yourself down to the River Jordan where he was baptised by John. It's a green and swirling river like any through an English meadow. Only close by is the brutal wilderness; a cracked dry and rocky landscape like something by Cezanne. If we had imagination enough, we would have baptisms like that at St Michael's. It only takes half a pound of imagination to hear God say over some young sprog at our font: *This is a new little one of mine, in whom I am delighted*. And a dove descending. But after that exaltation, Jesus is *led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the Devil*. St Mark puts it more strongly than this and says he was *driven* into the wilderness by the Spirit. The Spirit of God can indeed appear as a dove, but also as a driving wind.

This is where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found perfectly preserved in caves 2000 years after they were written. Because it's so dry there. Black at night, and searing white light by day. No wonder the Scrolls speak of a war between the Sons of Dark and the Sons of Light. And the silence is so thick it makes your ears sing. This is where Jesus met the Devil. You know what the modern theologians say – that it was his imagination – as if imagination were not real. Well, theirs isn't! As if the Devil was an hallucination. He probably was. The Devil is very good at getting himself up as an hallucination.

Come with Jesus and face the Devil. Imagine. Forty days and nights solitariness in that Black and white Cezanne landscape and nothing to eat in the silence. The temptations aren't all that bad actually. Pretty reasonable. Jesus could have wished the stones were bread. And cast yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple? Put it down to the vertigo he felt after six weeks alone without food. And bow down to worship the Devil? That's a reasonable enough prospect: it's what all the party leaders do and it's called pragmatism, *Realpolitik* and getting one's policies across.

Now turn away from the Devil in his best clothes, dressed for the State Opening of Parliament, and look into the face of Jesus. He resists the temptations because he is sickeningly aware that what He must do is not pragmatism, *Realpolitik* and getting one's policies across. Instead, it will mean his crucifixion just a few years on. He says Yes to crucifixion. No wonder the blessed angels *came and ministered unto him*

Let your imagination move on a little to when Jesus sent his disciples out to by two preaching. Jesus was then left alone. He, by whom the worlds were made, has time on his hands. What would go through his mind then? His vocation. What he was there for. The hanging promise of the nails and the spear and the sky at Good Friday turned dark as the wilderness. This is when he turns to no one but His Father in prayer. You have to imagine an ever-present terror.

On His own to all appearances talking to Himself. A vigorous young man in full consciousness of his imminent execution. Here He is alone. And so what does he do?

He prays for His disciples, *I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine.* And when you see Jesus alone and praying like that, remember it's you he's praying for. He was alone. But you are not alone. For the prayer of Jesus upholds you.

Then the day after Palm Sunday. The hosanna crowds all gone. Crucifixion just four days away. He is alone walking down the north slope of the Mount of Olives, the two miles from Jerusalem to where he was lodging with Mary and Lazarus in Bethany. And he's hungry but there's only a barren fig tree. He curses the tree: *Let no fruit grow on thee henceforward for ever!* Draw near to Jesus and see the expression on His face at that moment. What he must have felt then. We hear a lot about the love of Jesus. What about the rage of Jesus?

And at last the day itself is here. The morning of Good Friday. *And they led him away to be crucified.* We mustn't think of His crucifixion as an unfortunate end to the promising career of a popular preacher. It was there from the start. This is what His whole life has been for. From the prophecy of his death to Mary *a sword shall pierce thy own soul also.* From those temptations in the wilderness when he knew torture and execution were to be His destiny. And all the intervening time has been used up. And the day is here.

He stumbles - alone again - the Way of the Cross. I have seen it. Jerusalem is full of ironies. Nowadays it says clearly *The Via Dolorosa is a one-way street.* Imagine Jesus then in that delirium of crowds and noise and pain and horror. It really had come to this. What visions haunted his brain then? Did Veronica move briefly before him and wipe his brow with her handkerchief? Was there a moment's false unburdening when a loud voice and a sword forced Simon from Cyrene to carry his Cross?

Alone on Golgotha. Evil is banal. Golgotha today is a little hill overlooking the Jerusalem bus station.. Alone on Golgotha in the noise and the darkness with a crown of thorns pressing into his head. *And one ran and filled a sponge full of vinegar and put it on a reed and gave him to drink saying, "Let alone. Let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down!"* And there is no Elijah. There is nobody to speak of. The disciples have run away and He is alone. Then there is only the clatter of the soldiers cursing to be off and home and breaking the legs of the other victims. And the crying of Mary and Mary Magdalene and the taking down from the Cross. And the aroma of anointing, and the tomb in the rock.

These things are for you and for your salvation. And if they are to save you, then you must first let them into your imagination and let them work in you the love of Jesus. For you.

And again He is alone. Holy Saturday and the descent of Christ into hell, into *Sheol* the place of departed spirits. It has been said that descent was the plunging descent of a stone so heavy and so deep that the echo of it resounds through all time. That is, if we have imagination we can hear it now.

And what of Easter Morning itself when *cometh Mary Magdalene early while it was yet dark unto the sepulchre?* What of the Resurrection? It was done in silence. The retreat of the night curtain and rising of the Son of God. The gospels do not give us

even one word from God or the holy angels commanding the Resurrection. Again He is alone in the garden – like Adam at the first creation. And Jesus, the Second Adam, like the first Adam, waits for a woman to come and discover him.

I have not taught you any doctrine this morning. I have tried to draw your eyes to these scenes of Jesus, alone. This is because if our faith is to be real to us, then it must be *made* real. And the way it is made real is by the active imagination. For imagination is not a vain thing. It is not a false thing. It is one of the modes of the gifts of God – like the intellect and the senses.

God gives us a brain so we can reason about his truths and enjoy talking with one another about them. God gives us water so we can feel the reality of our christening. He gives us the Blessed Sacrament of the altar so we can feel His presence with us; so that we can actually take God into ourselves. He gives us imagination as *true make-believe* by which we enter the world of faith. Imagination is a sublime gift for it enables us to apprehend the eternal in time.

Finally then, meet Jesus on the walk to Emmaus all in the April evening. *O fools and slow of heart...and He expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. And they said, "Abide with us, for it is towards evening and the day is far spent..."*

It is always towards evening and the day is ever far spent. And if we seek him with lively imagination, He will abide with us always.