

## Bennochy church 10th March 2017

In the mid 1990's the movie *Devil's Advocate* was released starring Keanu Reeves and Al Pacino. Keanu plays Kevin Lomax, a happily married and very successful lawyer in America's South. Down in the South he's a man of integrity who's focussed on what's important in life. Then he's offered a job in the Big Apple, New York, with a worldwide law firm. Kevin and his wife move to New York, only to find Kevin being seduced by the atmosphere of greed, sex and power that surrounds the firm, and more particularly its owner, John Milton, played by Al Pacino.

But we soon discover that there is more to this movie than the age old theme of greed versus goodness. The plot is much more sinister. It turns out that John Milton is in fact the Devil, a devil who has learned to despise God and embrace self satisfaction. During the movie the Devil lets us in on his plan to seduce humanity.

*"You sharpen the human appetite to the point where it can split atoms with its desire; you build egos the size of cathedrals; fibre-optically connect the world to every eager impulse; grease even the dullest dreams with these dollar-green, gold-plated fantasies, until every human becomes an aspiring emperor, becomes his own God... And as we're straddling from one deal to the next, who's got his eye on the planet, as the air thickens, the water sours, and even the bees' honey takes on the metallic taste of radioactivity? And it just keeps coming, faster and*

*faster. There's no chance to think, to prepare; it's buy futures, sell futures, when there is no future!*

*"Look at me" cries the Devil, "underestimated from Day One! You'd never think I was a master of the universe, now, would you? I'm a surprise, Kevin. They don't see me coming: that's what you're missing."*

The story of the temptation of Jesus is that ultimate 'good v evil'. This is a spiritual conflict. Jesus is not here tempted by some kind of personification of evil. The devil is not a person, as in *Devil's advocate*, but what better way, to demonstrate Jesus internal turmoil, than to go 'toe to toe' with scriptures' greatest villain.

It is not coincidence that this happens at the beginning of Jesus ministry. It is when he would have been most vulnerable. Declared, Son of God at his recent baptism. He is beginning to understand who he is, and he is now embarking upon his ministry of proclaiming God's Kingdom. He might have thought, 'you know what, I am someone really special'.

This story is of no value what's so ever, if failure was not a distinct possibility. Otherwise it is just a sham. The point of the story is this; it was entirely possible for Jesus to fail the test, and so fall into temptation. The outcome is not inevitable.

The desert is a great place to be tempted. Luke's readers would be taken back to the great story of God's people escaping Egypt, and falling into temptation; *'let's go back to Egypt. Was it not better there?'* *'Moses you have taken us our here to die!'* They failed the faith test, to trust God for food and water, and when Moses was up Mount Sinai, what did they do? They melted down their Gold, and make their own God. Desert's are tough places to keep the faith.

The number 40 appears over and over again in scripture. 40 years the people of God wandered in the desert, before entering the promised land. Weakened by 40 days without food, Jesus is asked to change stone into bread. The ancient people of God clamoured for bread, they were hungry, and were given manna to eat. In an upper room, it was bread that Jesus took from the table. *This is my body, broken for you.* Something in there about spiritual hunger. This story only works, if people believed that Jesus could actually turn the stone to bread. The real power of temptation, lies beyond the hypothetical. It had to be possible.

It is interesting that Jesus response is given in the words of ancient scripture, and from what story? The ancient story of the crossing of the desert, Mount Sinai and the ten commandments. That is no coincidence. Connections are being made. History, in scripture, is not about historical facts, it is about connecting the stories of God. *'Man cannot live on bread alone'*. We need food

to live, but did they trust God to provide? Clearly they did not. Clearly Jesus did.

Having won the conflict, Jesus is now ready to enter the fray, and proclaim the Kingdom of God. It is as if this had to happen. Baptism and Temptation coming together. This is who you are. Now, go out there and prove it! And note, evil has not been defeated. It has left him, but only for a while.

I don't want to over spiritualise this passage. This is an inner conflict going on here and one that could so easily have been lost, and it is that fact, which makes this story so important for us. Life is all about our inner conflicts, around the decisions and choices we are asked to make, each and every day. The difference is, we know that on so many occasions, we fail to make the best choice, for ourselves and for others. We are distracted by the temptations. We don't always stick to our values. *'Love God, love your neighbour, love your enemy, love yourself'*.

The good news. God knows that. Inner conflict never leaves us. But may Jesus of Nazareth, who won this battle, and who around a table in an upper room, broke bread and shared the wine, may he give us strength to resist, and forgiveness, compassion and grace, when we fail. Amen.