

DANCING WITH DANGER

PREACHER : The Very Revd Adrian Newman, Dean

Sunday, February 21st 2010

Lent I

Luke 4:1-13

10.30am

Rochester Cathedral

Who am I?

- I played football with a gallic swagger
- I caused uproar when I crossed between Uniteds from Yorkshire to Lancashire
- My trademark was an upturned collar
- I've starred in films and most recently a play at a Parisian theatre
- As an amateur philosopher I'm most remembered for saying:
"when the seagulls follow the trawler, it's because they think sardines will be thrown into the sea"
- But I will perhaps always be best remembered for a kung-fu kick on a fan at Crystal Palace

The Frenchman, Eric Cantona, is widely held to have been responsible for English football's coming of age when he signed for Manchester United on 26 November 1992. His style and swagger sparked United's renaissance and elevated the newly-formed Premier League to a place of dominance among TV audiences around the world. Cantona regularly tops polls as the most influential player in the history of the Premier League.

A month ago, at the age of 43, and 13 years after he retired from football, Cantona made his stage debut as an actor in the play "Face au Paradis" at the Theatre Marigny in Paris, just off the Champs Elysées. It was a demanding debut, 90 minutes on stage without a break, in a slow-moving 2-man drama, for which he received some decent reviews. He was asked if he had been nervous. He replied, **"When I was a kid my ambition was to take the stage before 80,000 people. I did that. Now it's a theatre with 400 people. But if you don't expose yourself to danger, you can never know who you are"**.

The last sentence of that quote from Eric Cantona is the theme of my sermon this morning:

"If you don't expose yourself to danger, you can never know who you are".

Today's gospel reading for this, the 1st Sunday in Lent, takes us into the wilderness with Jesus at the start of his public ministry.

The Judean wilderness is a barren, inhospitable desert. It is a place of raw, physical danger, where life of any shape or description clings desperately to the flimsiest of nourishment - lacking food and water, shade from the blistering daytime sun or shelter from the biting night-time cold. In Jesus' day it was also well known for banditry, exposed to the lawlessness that grows around out-of-the-way places. It was relentlessly isolated from human contact.

The strange thing is that despite - or maybe because of - its fearsome reputation, the wilderness came to be associated in biblical thought as a place of divine encounter and spiritual renewal.

If you think about it, this is odd. In English and European mythology, woods and forests - the places of mystery in our cultural landscape - are to be feared and avoided. There is little suggestion that if you want to truly discover yourself you should disappear into the woods. But in biblical mythology, the wilderness was precisely that - a place of self-discovery and spiritual renewal.

"If you don't expose yourself to danger, you can never know who you are".

I have preached before in this cathedral about the influence of the great Victorian and Edwardian explorers on the modern English psyche. They came to see exposure to risk and danger as the most effective means of self-development, and they viewed the inhospitable territories of the antarctic, the desert or the mountains as places of self-discovery. This is completely in keeping with a biblical understanding of the wilderness. It's Cantona country.

So. Jesus, at the start of his public ministry, enters the Judean wilderness, a place of danger and deprivation, but also self-discovery and spiritual renewal. The question is: did he jump, or was he pushed? Did he go there of his own will and volition, or was he constrained to go there against all of his better instincts?

The biblical suggestion, here in Luke's gospel but even more strongly in Matthew's account where we're told the Spirit 'hurled him out into the wilderness', is that he was pushed, driven there by the Spirit of God. His 40 days were not by accident but by design, part of a divine plan preparing him for all that he would face in the years ahead.

If this is true, there is something profoundly comforting in the notion of Jesus experiencing the wilderness as a place he did not choose to endure.

If we find ourselves in places of danger, difficulty or deprivation, not of our choosing but by force of circumstance, we can draw strength from the experiences of Jesus in his own particular wilderness. If we feel isolated and alone, exposed to forces outside our control, it can make all the difference in the world to sense the presence of the hungry, thirsty, tired and lonely Christ alongside us. If we are being tested to our outer limits, or tempted beyond measure, there are depths of resilience and resistance to be plumbed from one who has travelled this path before us.

Little wonder that theologians make connections between Jesus in the wilderness and Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. On both occasions, at the beginning and end of his public ministry, tested to the limits, stretched to the point of breaking. But for all his human frailty, digging deep into the inner recesses of his soul and finding strength to overcome. In our wilderness or our Gethsemane, we are never alone.

But, there is another way of looking at this. Was he pushed? Maybe Jesus jumped after all.

In 1997 the Birmingham author, Jim Crace, wrote a stunning book called 'Quarantine'. It is a fictional account, from a non-Christian author, of Jesus' experience in the wilderness, and it bears much reflection. This section, at the beginning of Chapter 10, gives a flavour of where Crace is coming from:

A lesser person, Jesus thought as he departed from the dying body in the tent on that first afternoon, would lose his nerve and head back for the way-marked caves, up in the hills. That was the easy path. He had seen the footprints of the little group of travellers who had preceded him, deviating from the camel trail. He could have followed them and passed his quarantine in company, tucked into the folds of clay, amongst the poppies, and exposed to nothing worse than forty days of boredom and discomfort. But Jesus had a harsher challenge for himself. Quite what it was he didn't know. He only understood that he should choose a way that was more punishing. The worse it was, the better it would be. That, surely, was the purpose of the wilderness. He knew the scriptures and the stories of the prophets. Triumph over hardship was their proof of holiness.

Quarantine's thesis, among other things, is that Jesus chose the experience of wilderness for himself. Knowing the Scriptures, inspired by the prophets, Jesus wanted to test himself, place himself in the crucible of the wilderness and be fired in the kiln of testing.

If this is so, then the gospel doesn't simply give us encouragement and comfort during our own times of testing, it positively challenges us to seek such places out as a matter of choice, to deliberately put ourselves in situations which will expose us to risk and danger, in order to grow in self-knowledge, personal development and spiritual renewal.

And that is taking us back into Cantona territory. **"If you don't expose yourself to danger, you can never know who you are"**.

I confess, in a playful moment I wondered about giving this sermon the title '**rabbi in the headlights**' (think about it) but actually I'm not trying to suggest that you deliberately jump in front of oncoming traffic and see what the experience does to you. No, exposing yourself to danger doesn't necessarily mean bungee jumping or bullfighting, it might mean being prepared to face those things you usually shy away from, putting yourself in a place where you will be forced to rely on God, to seek resources outside yourself. Only you will know what this might be in your particular circumstances – that challenge you may have been avoiding.

As we enter Lent, it's like walking with Jesus into the wilderness. For some of us, this will not be a matter of choice – things will have been happening to us beyond our control, and like it or not we're going to go through a time of testing. For others it will be a conscious choice to fall in step with Christ for these 40 days, to expose ourselves to the deprivations of whatever wilderness we choose to confront.

Eric Cantona would love it. **"If you don't expose yourself to danger, you can never know who you are"**.