

**The Manchester Sermon 2010:**

*The Temptation of Jesus*

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*If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made into bread. Matthew 4:3*

Do you remember the story of Midas? He's the one who loved gold so much that he wished that everything he touched could turn to gold.

At first it was fantastic – that old garden chair, those tin plates, that worthless heap of boxes, his bed, his bath, his pots and pans – he had golden clothes and golden hair – he looked like Paris Hilton.

Midas went on-line and bought a castle in Vegas – it wasn't real gold, but he could fix that up himself. Then he sat down and had a servant pour him a celebratory glass of Krug n Soda in his golden goblet – he raised it to his lips but instead of Krug by the glug, he got a solid slug of gold. So he sat like a baby while the servants fed and watered him.

Midas bent down to stroke his hunting dog, but suddenly he had a life-size golden Jeff Koons on his hands.

He swung up onto his horse, and in the second of touch and rear, his mount became a triumphal monument, glittering and priceless, but useless if what you wanted to do was to ride into the hills.

Soon he couldn't touch a thing – he became the world's most expensive leper. No-one wanted to go near Midas. He lived in the isolation ward of his own desire

Then one day his little girl, who had been away, came running back into the palace, delighting at the golden flowers and golden birds and sliding across the golden pond – she thought it was a game just for her.

*Papa, Papa*, she shouted, jumping into his arms, and there she was, lifeless, perfect. Truly, his golden girl.

It was time for Midas to re-think a few values.

Like many of us I hoped that the current economic crisis, so severe and without excuse, would be a global and generational opportunity to re-think our values.

Amassing wealth has always been a driving factor in the human psyche – nothing new about that as the Midas story shows. What is new – only about 250 years old, industrial revolution onwards – is the *scale* of the endeavour. Stones into bread... base metal into gold, we have managed in a very short time to turn all of the planet and all of its peoples into one vast money-making machine.

And it started here in Manchester – Cottonopolis as it was called – because from 1840 to 1914 60% of the world's cotton came here to be processed.

Imagine it – the vast steamed-powered gas-lit factories and the back-to back tenements thrown up in between. The filth, the smoke, the stink of dye and ammonia, sulphur and coal. The cash, the ceaseless activity day and night, the deafening noise of looms, of trains, of trams, of wagons on cobbles, of teeming relentless human life. A Niebleheim hell, and a triumphant work of labour and determination.

Everyone who visited Manchester both admired it and felt appalled. Charles Dickens used it as the basis for his novel *HARD TIMES* – the best of times and the worst of times were here – everything the machine could achieve, and the terrible human cost.

Frederick Engels, the son of a German industrialist came here to manage his father's business interests, and he invited his friend Karl Marx to see what happens when, as he put it, 'people are regarded only as useful objects.'

Marx, writing the *Communist Manifesto*, was not against the creation of wealth if

wealth would end poverty, but he wanted to see an equal society. His early vision of Socialism was that it should distribute wealth to provide for man's animal needs, so that man could have the time and the leisure to attend to his human needs.

It is an interesting distinction – and close to Jesus' strange words that 'The Kingdom of Heaven is within you.' It seems that meaning comes from the inside, not from the outside, and human beings are meaning-seeking creatures. Marx and Christ agree that there is more to life than money.

Unfortunately late Capitalism – the Thatcher/Regan revolution, did not believe that there is more to life than money. There was plenty of lip-service about morals and family values and folksy feel-good sentimental hogwash about marriage and stable societies being the blah-de-blah bedrock. But money was all that money had to offer... Got a car? Get two. Got a house? Get a bigger one. Holidays? Borrow the cash. Credit cards? How many do you want?

The last thirty years – 1979-2009 – have been about grotesquely multiplying our animal needs and making it pretty impossible to attend to our human needs. Education is hopeless, the arts are called luxury items, time off is for wimps, and love is part of the upgrade culture. Keep me for two years and get a newer model.

Everything in our ethos and our society has been towards consumption – all the stones we've eaten that we were told were bread have made us ill and fat and stupid and discontented and finally depressed to death. The World Health Organisation says that by 2020, depression will be the second largest cause of death in the western world – right behind heart disease.

But depressed or not, dead or not, we were still singing along to More is More when the

band got up and left. The money ran out. Well, it didn't run out, it just disappeared overnight like the faery gold it was – you know the kind – you promise everything to the imp, go home with the bag of coins, and when you open it it's full of rocks...

So now, our animal needs won't be met in triplicate – they won't be met at all. You won't be able to own your house. You can't afford decent food. You will work until you are 70 in a job that offers nothing. You won't have a pension and your kids will be paying back student loans until they are 40.

We can blame the banks. We can feel like victims. But we bought into this. Money has been our only currency and our core value, which is insane, as it doesn't really exist.

You exist – the person I love. My body exists – my one true home. The planet exists – beautiful, blue, long-suffering, fragile, and irreplaceable. Friendship exists, and our kids, and books and pictures and music, and the feeling we get, when just for a second, life in all its unlived possibility stands in front of us.

Stones are not bread. There is no shortcut to a life that is nourishing and satisfying. It can't be bought... why do we not know that? Jesus' reply to Satan was Man Shall Not Live by Bread Alone – and we do know, without explanation, what that means.

I think that Jesus' reply has two meanings in it: That the whole world is not there to be rendered into a product for my benefit – and even then, even if I were to eat up the whole world, it would not satisfy me.

Our modern version – where stones are not even made into bread – just packaged as bread – would delight Satan. Don't even bother with the alchemy – just get the wrapper right.

Transfats for the body. Transfats for the soul,...

The next thing that Satan does is to tempt Christ to throw himself off the top of the pinnacle; as the son of god, angels will bear him up, rather than see him dashed to pieces.

*‘They shall bear thee up least at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone.’*

But Jesus is no Jewish princess. He knows that this new scenario is a swift move sideways on the part of Satan. First he appealed to Jesus’ ordinary human appetites – you are very hungry – get yourself something to eat. Now he treats him as a God – or so it seems – but really he is appealing to Jesus’ vanity. Forget your ordinary human limits – they don’t apply to you.

Tony Blair anyone?

When money becomes the core value – when as Engels put it, people regard each other only as useful objects – then celebrity culture offers a seductive way to redefine yourself. As a celebrity, you become or seem to become, an individual. Everyone knows your name. The rules don’t apply.

When celebrities say – as they always do – ‘it’s not about the money’, they mean it. And we need them to mean it – because money culture is full of self-disgust. We need to keep some places that seem untouched by the buy and sell, even though the whole thing is contaminated. To talk about ‘my dream’ or ‘my music’ helps us all to feel that there are other values – even though the dream is manufactured and the music makes millions

The rise of the me-society – and the buzz words of individuality and choice are used cynically by the market, but they can only be used to promote everything from hair-dye to mass tourism because they hit a place in us that knows we are being swamped and obliterated, that knows we hardly exist, that knows how difficult it is in consumer-land to

be anything but a clone. So twenty million people a week watch the X factor etc, and dream of being Susan Boyle.

Celebrities, of course, have to crash. We love the sex scandals and the addictions, the burn-outs, the bloats, the anorexia. Celebrities are always throwing themselves off the roofs of their lives – and finding that they can't fly after all.

And then there's the rest of us – because the huge rise in drugs and drink problems and self-harm especially among young people, is a way of trying not to be a mere mortal. Getting out of your head is also about refusing the limits of your own body – when you can't live in peace there – and because every bit of fucking advertising is saying all the time just what Satan says to Jesus – Go on – you can do it – risk it – you're not like the rest – you're superman – put on your Calvin Klein's and kick ass.

Jerome Kerviel, Nick Leeson, Bernie Madoff – they thought the rules didn't apply to them. Not ordinary mortals. Look at me I can fly.

No, says Jesus. I can't fly. It's about limits. It's about respecting the human. And it's about respecting other human beings too – when you believe you are more god than human – you are in trouble – but so are the rest of us.

Tony Blair anybody?

And then Satan stops being sympathetic – aw shucks you're hungry – or behaving like Simon Cowell – five seconds of fame and when you hit the ground in pieces no one will even want a bit of you as a souvenir – no, Satan gets serious. He takes Jesus up on the high mountain. He shows him the cities of the world and their glory. He says '*All these things will I give thee if thou wilt fall down and worship me.*'

This is playing with the big boys. But the language gives the game away. What looks like absolute power – the kingdom of the world – begins with absolute submission.

Worship me.

But Jesus can't be bought off. He's got soul. He says he's serving god. And Satan departs from him.

We need leaders who can't be bought off. It's easy to point the finger at the ones who just fall for the money – the short cuts to riches, the stones into bread brigade, like Mugabe or Marcos.

More dangerous and less obvious are the ones who take up the caped crusader hero myth – like Blair and Bush – who think they can fly round the world fixing it – or who will go to war because it is RIGHT to do so. And then there are the ones who can wreck everything – like Hitler or Stalin... Power. The Kingdom of the World.

It's corruption in every case – and the word is the clue. It comes from the French word ROMPRE. To break.

The French have 3 verbs for 'to break'. 'Casser': the chair. 'Briser': your leg, and Rompre – which is used in the sacrament, the breaking of the bread, and is used for breaking faith, breaking a bond, breaking with someone you loved or trusted.

Corruption is the breaking of faith. The breaking of a bond. That is why it is so serious – because it comes from the inner place not the outer place.

As Auden put it in his poem In Sickness and in Health. *Some goods are smashed that cannot be replaced.*

That is hard for a throw-away upgrade culture to understand. But we don't have throw-away souls. And I still think soul is a good word, a lovely word, for something that

doesn't exist empirically, scientifically, quantifiably, but we know what it means to lose it.... You know what I mean when I say, '*What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?*'

The only way to be more than a number, more than a useful object, more than a consumer, more than a CV or a facebook profile, is to identify what is valuable to you, what is worthwhile to you, worth living worth for – perhaps even worth dying for, and then to keep faith with the you that you are. I don't mean in a rigid paranoid way; the self changes but the self isn't for sale.

In this story, Satan has to keep switching tactics – rather like a Cold War soviet spy – if the boobs don't work, try the binbag full of cash. But Jesus knows who he is. It isn't goods or fame or power that motivate Jesus. Yet it is called the 'Temptation of Christ', so we have to assume that there was a struggle going on. This was a serious encounter.

After this encounter, Jesus begins his ministry. He goes and preaches the Sermon on the Mount – a really radical text that none of us can live up to – especially those right-wing Christians who are always talking about going back to the Bible.

Matthew 5: 43/44 – part of the Sermon on the Mount - had obviously been ripped out of those Bible-belt Bibles on Burn A Koran day...

It is, of course... *Love your enemies. Bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you.*

Sarah Palin anybody?

I have noticed that when right-wing religious folk talk about going back to the Bible they generally mean putting homosexuals and the homeless in gaol, putting women and

minorities in their place, and putting white men back in power.

But I tell you now that the religious right have a vision for our society, and if we are not careful they will get their way. It started with Bush and Blair destabilising the world in the name of truth and freedom because God had told them it was so. It will end with Sarah Palin and the Tea Party running America.

I said at the start that I had hoped that the economic crisis would cause us to rethink our values – what is so upsetting is that the progressive secular Left has not done any rethinking worth the name – just a bit of apologising and tinkering – while the really scary Right has gone for an all-out war on all those touchy-feely policies they hated – as though subsidised theatre and the arts and single mums and welfare payments brought us to our knees – not a totally naked and savage free market god. Even Baal the flesh-eating god of the Philistines wasn't as demanding in his sacrifices as the god of the free market. All of the planet and all of its peoples fed into the money-making machine...

I am not suggesting going vegan and cycling everywhere – though you can if you want to – I am thinking that what we can learn from the encounter between Christ and Satan is the importance of knowing what is valuable and standing up for what is valuable. Our human needs matter. We need time, rest, creativity, community, relationship. We need stretches of life that can't be measured by GDP or economic output. We need to ask if weapons are more important than education. We need to ask what kind of people we want to be and what kind of a life is worthwhile. We need to say that life has an inside as well as an outside – and if organised religion has failed to protect us there – and it has – we will have to find new ways of talking about the invisible, the unknowable, and our

obligations to what cannot be counted, but is intensely real.

Jesus let's Satan have his say – but Jesus knows the difference between the trickster world of stones for bread, the fantasies of superhero status, the glittering disappointments of money and power and what Gurdjieff later called views from the real world.

We are more than money. We are meaning.

Don't apologise for your soul.