

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 6th March 2022
The First Sunday of Lent

Collect

Heavenly Father,
your Son battled with the powers of darkness,
and grew closer to you in the desert:
help us to use these days to grow in wisdom and prayer
that we may witness to your saving love
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Romans 10:8b-13

‘The word is near you,
on your lips and in your heart’
(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord
and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes
with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture
says, ‘No one who believes in him will be put to shame.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and
Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, ‘Everyone who calls on
the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the
wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those
days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God,
command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “One does not
live by bread alone.” ’

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the
devil said to him, ‘To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me,
and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’ Jesus answered him,
‘It is written,
“Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.” ’

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him,
‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,
“He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you”,
and
“On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” ’
Jesus answered him, ‘It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ’ When the devil had
finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Sermon

I am currently leading a course to train people in occasional preaching. As part of the course, we take time to focus on the need for prayer throughout the process of preparing and writing a sermon. The hope is that when we decide what to preach about, we are following God's will and not our own.

As we were discussing this during last week's session, one of the course participants asked rather nervously how we can really know that what we choose to preach about is indeed what God has placed on our hearts. Even as he asked the question, he said, "I mean, I know we pray about it, but even still... How do we know?"

It's a good question, isn't it? And it's a good question not just about preaching, but really about the whole of our journey of faith. How do we know that as we live out our lives on a daily basis, we are following God's call, rather than simply doing what we please? And while prayer is clearly a significant part of the answer, just as the participant was indicating, we all know that sometimes we're rather less good at listening in our prayer lives than we might like to be.

Many of you will know that Lent is not always my favourite time of year. Perhaps it's just because I eat too much chocolate, but it can also be a challenge to find the right tone for the season. To find a way to nourish and nurture our faith, rather than beating ourselves up. It strikes me that trying to focus on drawing closer to God's call on our lives might be a good place to start.

Of course, as I explained to the course participant, there is no way of being certain that what we are saying is what God is calling us to say. In fact the moment we really think we are certain is probably the moment we should stop preaching. It's also important to remember from the outset that we are all works in progress – and human. A life of faith is neither straightforward nor linear. At times we will find it easier to align ourselves with God's will, and at times God will feel distant and God's call hard to discern. Cutting ourselves a little slack – even during Lent – is no bad thing.

It is also fair to say that sometimes we *do* know our motivations quite clearly. That moment when you have a piece of information that could help someone from making a fool of themselves, and there's a part of you that would rather like to see them fall flat on their face. Or in a closer relationship, knowing that making a particular comment will always wind someone up. Do you succumb, enjoying that slight sense of power? [Of course neither of these things would ever occur to someone like me!]

Often, though, the situation is far less cut and dried. And there is so much in this morning's reading about Jesus's temptations in the desert that can help to guide us; to find a little more clarity. It can help, I think, to see the temptations as the obstacles that somehow prevent us from developing our relationship with God more fully, that divert us from where we want to be in our deepest selves. So let's explore the three kinds of temptation in a little more depth.

The Devil's first trick is to try to get Jesus to turn stones into bread. Bearing in mind that Jesus hadn't eaten and was clearly famished, the temptation here relates to our physical needs and desires. I want to be clear, though. I am a firm believer in "John 10:10 faith" – by which I mean faith that places at its heart Jesus's words in John 10:10: "I came that they may have life, and have it

abundantly.” I really do not believe that every need or desire that we have comes from the devil and should be denied.

So how do we know the difference? How do we work out whether this is temptation, or abundant life? That’s where I think we need to ask ourselves whether fulfilling the need will draw us closer to God, or get in the way of our relationship with God. For example, are we focusing on our physical needs at the expense of our spiritual needs? Is this about gratification, or something deeper that draws us closer to the nature of God’s love? It may not always be obvious, but Lent provides an opportunity to dig a little deeper and ask ourselves some searching questions.

The second temptation is an offer of glory and authority over all the kingdoms of the world in return for worshipping the Devil. In our own lives, this is the perennial question about the things we make into Gods of our own. Do our lives reflect our values? It almost rolls off the tongue to talk about the lure of big houses and fast cars – and perhaps it is easy to believe that our own more modest homes show that this is not something we need to worry about.

And yet we are all lured by other Gods. The reason that social media is so powerful is because most of us care about the opinions of other people. Just think about the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO in colloquial parlance), which leads us to chase the things we fear we may be missing out on just because everyone else is talking about them. The question we need to ask ourselves during Lent is whether this sometimes gets in the way of our relationship with God.

For some of us, the temptation of other Gods takes a slightly different form. We are so keen to be in control that we almost try to make ourselves God – all knowing and all powerful. Again, Lent can provide the opportunity to ask ourselves whether our own need for control is preventing us from listening carefully to God’s call – even if it leaves us feeling a little uneasy.

The third temptation facing Jesus is about putting God to the test. It reminds me a little of my five year old self, lying in bed feeling nauseous, and saying to God that I would accept anything as long as I didn’t throw up. Perhaps as adults our bargaining is a little more sophisticated, but are there ways in which we put God to the test? That we fail to fully trust in God’s presence and love. It might even take the form of trying to prove that we are worthy of God’s love – rather than trusting that the love is freely given, if only we will receive it. Is it possible during Lent to take a little time to allow ourselves to be held in God’s love, and see where that might lead us?

I have already admitted that I don’t always find Lent easy. It can feel as though there is a pressure for it to be a meaningful time. And the tone is so often one of penitence and austerity – which can sometimes feel appropriate, but at other times simply doesn’t help us to draw closer to God.

So I wonder whether we might commit ourselves to gentleness this Lent. To taking a little time to explore those things that get in the way of our relationship with God. To focusing also on whatever it is that helps us to grow in our relationship with God. And to knowing throughout that just like all of God’s children, we are held in a love that will never let us go.

Amen