**10th March 2019**

**Walking the Way of Jesus 2. Resisting Temptation**

**Luke 4.1-11**

Last week we talked about the call of God on our lives. ‘Why am I here?’ ‘Where should I be going?

We did in the context of our new mission statement as a church:

‘***Inspired by Jesus, walking His way of radical love, making a difference in this world***’.

I talked about how ‘Walking the Way’ - a phrase which comes from a national initiative by the United Reformed Church to emphasise discipleship - suggests a journey: we haven’t made it, but we are following, stumbling at times but still moving, humbly walking with our God. It reminds us that believing in Jesus is not enough. You don’t tick the box and book your seat in heaven. It is about living out the way of Christ: how are we loving our enemy, forgiving others, dealing with our anger, serving the least, offering hospitality to all- living a kingdom of God lifestyle? The Way of Jesus sets our direction and gives us the parameters for the journey and what we are about.

I suggested that our calling comes before our destiny. We need to understand the person God created before we can begin to understand the person God created us to be.

You need to strengthen the core of your being: The core is our relationship to Christ. Out of that relationship we have our security and conviction. This is why and how we do what we do. Relationship holds us together.

I quoted Frederick Buechner who wrote: the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet’. The fact that we are passionate about something is often a sign that this is where God’s calling us to be. Finding our passions- answering the question ‘what do you want?’

I talked about perseverance and discernment through all that.

This week we look at the temptations to pull us away from our calling and vocation as people of God, followers of Christ.

Temptations: I don’t know if you have given up anything for Lent?

There was an overweight businessman who decided it was time to shed some excess pounds and so he gave up cream cakes for Lent. He took his new diet and his Lenten promise seriously, even changing his driving route to avoid his favourite bakery. One morning, however, he showed up at work with a gigantic coffee cake. Everyone in the office scolded him, but his smile remained nonetheless. "This is a special coffee cake," he explained. "I accidentally drove by the bakery this morning and there in the window was a host of goodies. I felt it was no accident, so I prayed, 'Lord, if you want me to have one of those delicious coffee cakes, let there be a parking spot open right in front.' And sure enough, the tenth time around the block, there it was!"

All of us know what it is to enter the wilderness of temptation.
Temptation is part and parcel of the human condition.

Giving up chocolate or cream cakes is one of those small trivial temptations. More blatant are bad choices – having affairs, betraying those we love, embezzling money, acting corruptly – all very blatant temptations.

Knife crime among our young people is causing much anxiety at the moment. In recent days many have commented on underlying causes for its epidemic levels. Austerity cuts to police and youth services, lack of hope for young people, a culture of violence and low aspirations, failure and rejection, and bad parenting role models.

I was moved to read the story of Amani Simpson[[1]](#endnote-1), a victim of knife stabbing, who rediscovered his Christian faith as a result of the attack, and who now goes round talking to other young people about the issue. He encourages parents not to judge their kids but to listen to them. But he tells the young people , whatever the underlying causes, they still have a choice to make about whether to take a knife with them when they go out. He encourages young people not to get involved because it’s a lot harder to leave once you jump into that kind of environment.

The temptations of Jesus, and how the devil may tempt us is, are far more subtle temptations and strike at the heart of our identity and the course in life that we have set.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus spent forty days and forty nights in the Wilderness, to be in communion with God and to reflect upon his upcoming ministry. While there, Satan confronts Jesus. It is reminder to us that goodness is not synonymous with innocence. True goodness comes only after a struggle with evil.

This account of Jesus’ wilderness temptation is preceded by passages that detail Jesus’ baptism and genealogy; both establish matters of Jesus’ identity that will play key roles in the temptation. In baptism, Jesus is identified as “the Beloved” of God (3:22). This intimacy of relationship is critical – Jesus trusts God as he faces temptation in the wilderness. The genealogy declares Jesus “the son (as was thought) of Joseph” and then traces the lineage to Adam “son of God” (3:23, 38). Who Jesus is in relationship to God is part of the challenge in the temptations – two of those testings begin with the explicit challenge: “if you are the Son of God…”

Christ claims that you and I are worthy of being one of his dearly beloved - worth dying for, and worth returning for, in order that we might be his ... forever.

When Martin Luther became depressed, he saw it as a temptation of Satan and he would turn to his ancient foe and cry out, "I am baptized. I am baptized." He needed the assurance of his identity, that he belonged to Jesus. If he were going to carry out the great work God had given him to do he needed to be sure that even though his faith might waver, God's all-encompassing love would not. He needed the assurance that he was held, held firmly in that mighty grip of mercy.

The psalmist encourages us to wait for the Lord, be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord (Psalm 27.14).

We live in an impatient world. We want answers now, we want faster broadband, quick dinners, instant results. The thought of going into the desert to stop, fast, pray and think about your calling for forty days is bizarre by modern values.

It takes time to clarify decisions, especially major ones. We become impatient with god when decisions don’t happen quickly. He often restrains us from moving forward, to tests us or prevent us from charging headlong into a dead end. A nudge from God is what we need to know when the time of holding back is over.

The time of waiting is plagued by doubt. In Shakespeare’s Troilus and Cressida, the Trojan prince Hector said to his father, the king of Troy, ‘Modest doubt is called the beacon of the wise’.

Doubt will be with us in every one of our choices until we have made our minds to walk a particular path and sometimes afterward too. Doubt is the travelling companion of wisdom, and God can use our uncertainty as the humility necessary to remain dependent on him. Doubt is part of being human.

The devil used doubt to try and thwart the ministry of Jesus ‘if you are the son of God’ and seeming to plant doubt in Jesus mind about his very identity. Modest doubt - such a truth.

We need to live through doubt, not just with doubt, and that takes courage. Often decision making is tumultuous like being tossed every way by the waves of the sea. Ken Costa recalls at a crucial moment in his life when faced with a period of insecurity about the future, reading Psalm 107

Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble,
    and he brought them out of their distress.
**29**He stilled the storm to a whisper;
    the waves of the sea[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=psalm+107&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-15729b)] were hushed.
**30**They were glad when it grew calm,
    and he guided them to their desired haven.

It was a releasing picture. God brings the sailors out of distress to peaceful waters: making a final decision takes a deep breath and convictions. The bible promises that if we are courageous in pursuing the ways of God, God stays with us. Undergirding all our decisions is the God who is

our refuge and our fortress,
    our God, in whom we trust. Psalm 91

Jesus responds to the devil, not by attempting to argue (arguing with temptation is often a way of playing with the idea until it becomes too attractive to resist – ten times round the block for the cream cake!).

Jesus resists by quoting scripture.[[2]](#endnote-2)

 The passages he draws from come from the story of Israel’s in the wilderness. He is going to succeed where Israel failed.

Physical needs and wants are important, but loyalty to God is more important still. Jesus is not going to use his power selfishly just for himself by turning stones into bread.

Henri Neuwen in his book In the name of Jesus[[3]](#endnote-3), calls this the temptation to be relevant – giving people what they want, not what they need. We al want material stuff – but our deepest need is to restore our relationship with our Creator. It is a temptation many churches fall in to – trying to be relevant but then neglecting our main calling.

Jesus is indeed to become the world’s true Lord, but the path to that status, and the mode of it when it arrives, is humble service, not a devilish seeking after status and power. ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.”

Trust in God doesn’t mean acting stupidly to force God into doing a spectacular rescue. ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” The power that Jesus already has, which he will shortly display in healings in particular, is to be used for restoring others to life and strength, not for cheap stunts.

His status as God’s son commits him not to showy prestige, but to the strange path of humility, service and even death. The enemy will return to test this resolve again.

We are unlikely to be tested in the same way that Jesus was tested, but every Christian will be tested at the points which matter most in their lives – make no mistake. It is a central point of Christian vocation to learn to recognize the voices that whisper attractive lies, to distinguish them from the voice of God, and to use the simple but direct weapons provided in scripture to rebut the lies with truth.

What are the lies being whispered to us today? In our lives? In our work? In our church?

Lies centred around our core identity: Are you a child of God?

God doesn’t exist – scientists have disproved God.

Thinking people have no need for childish notions such as ‘faith’.

I haven’t had any great religious experiences – maybe I’m not a child of God?

*The word of God says: You are my beloved – in you I delight*

Lies about what is truly important in life: turn stones into bread:

Money is all important – that should decide everything

My self-esteem is linked to what I have (the latest gadget, the new car, a house in the right area) rather than who I am – or more importantly whose I am

*The word of God says: Man shall not live on bread alone*

Lies about success and how to achieve in life.

You’ve got to sacrifice your principles a bit if you want to get on.

Humility won’t get you anywhere – people will walk over you

You deserve it – life owes you something.

We want an easy life – that doesn’t cost in time or money.

We want people to worship us and bow down and be at our beck and call – we want to be pampered!

*The Word of God says; you shall do homage to the Lord your God and worship him alone.*

Lies about testing our most important relationships

Take advantage of your parents or your children – they won’t mind

Having affairs can be good for relationships.

I can’t believe in God because he doesn’t answer my prayers.

*The word of God says; ‘You are not to put the Lord your God to the test’*

Temptation is all about choices. Good choices and avoiding the bad choices

Ken Costa in his book ‘Know your Why’[[4]](#endnote-4) a book about finding and fulfilling your calling in life, says that insecurity about the legitimacy of one’s calling is not the only great obstacle facing those currently in the workplace. There is a huge increase in the choices available that were not to previous generations..

More choices do not guarantee an easier life; often they are paralyzing rather than liberating. Overwhelmed by possibilities people can be gripped by FOMO: fear Of Missing Out. This fear is crippling many people who believe they are stuck and worry that making one choice excludes the benefits of another.

Choice can be the enemy of commitment he says. If you are in Christ you don’t miss out. If you believe the future belongs to God he is able to lead you through the fear trap and new perspectives take hold. Fear diminishes as favour increases. Those who put their trust in God will have no reason to fear missing out in life.

Unchecked FOMO can grow into a hunger for accumulating possessions as well as experiences. The problem behind another popular acronym: YOLO (You Only Live Once) is that its either an invitation to binge in indulgence or an expression of the desire to make every moment pleasing to God. When Paul wrote to the Colossians he admonished them to seize every opportunity to work for the Lord , enjoy all the good things that God had given, and to share those with others: whatever you do work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord not human masters (Col 3.23)

Work can carry its temptations.

People work for a variety reasons. For many the primary reasons is for cash for their daily needs and lifestyle. Others are motivated by their ambitions and seek a career and to move up the career ladder. Still others work for a cause, they throw themselves into something much bigger than themselves, believing in the bigger purpose of their work.

All of these are legitimate motivations. It is vital we earn money to provide for our families and our needs. It is good that we push ourselves on to new challenges and take pride in our work. It is certainly good to contribute to the world around us.

However too great a focus on **cash, career or cause** can bring temptations.

If not checked, too great a focus on cash and earnings can rapidly lead to a disengaged interest toward both out work and our colleagues. It’s all about the money – and money can dehumanize anything it touches.

So often career minded people become neurotic as they constantly try to gauge how they are shaping up to the expectations of colleagues. Character matters more than success but often character gets compromised in the pursuit of success.

The great danger for working for a cause, however noble, is self-righteousness and we can see our work in purely utilitarian terms. The ends justifies the means. Rather than valuing the little things we fixate on the bigger picture, the biggest social change and justify mean and immoral practices on reaching the goal and are harsh and judgmental of anyone who doesn’t agree with us, who are not enlightened and righteous like we are!.

Missing from all three of these is any sense of the value of work itself. We focus on greater and greater output – more cash, a greater career, a bigger cause – and neglect what we are putting in. What we need is a calling – a sense of purpose rather than simply a means to an end. This is what the Spirit of God does in our lives. When we are flowing with the Spirit we are co-operating fully in our God given callings. Go with the flow. Follow the Spirit of Jesus. When you are distracted from your God given purpose and calling, the Spirit will guide you and challenge you and lead you, as He did with Jesus in the wilderness

Oscar Wilde once said that ‘the true friend stabs you in the front’. I think he realised that it is only the really good friend who can speak the word that you really need to hear, the one that pains you but saves you from yourself.

The Word of God is described as a sword – a sword of truth, dividing soul and spirit and judging the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Make a good friend of God’s Word – it is our travelling companion, especially in times of wilderness.

Unlike Jesus we have each other too. Let us not be afraid to stab each other from the front. We are in a battle. There is a war going on – a spiritual war and most of our society is being seduced and sold a pack of lies. We need a constant prodding to wake up.

At the heart of our resistance to temptation is love and loyalty to God who has already called us his beloved children in Christ and who holds before us the calling to follow him in the path which leads to true glory.

1. Guardian, 9th March 2019 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Tom Wright, Luke for Everyone, SPCK 2004 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. H. Neuwen, In the Name of Jesus, Reflections on Christian Leadership, DLT, 1989 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Kem Costa, Know Your Why, Thomas Nelson, 2008 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)