**First Sunday in Lent**

**1st March 2020**

**Focus Scripture: Psalm 32, Matthew 4.1-11**

An overweight businessman decided it was time to shed some excess pounds. He took his new diet seriously, even changing his driving route to avoid his favorite bakery. One morning, however, he showed up at work with a gigantic cream cake. Everyone in the office scolded him, but his smile remained nonetheless. "This is a special cream 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 cream cakes, let there be a parking spot open right in front.' And sure enough, the eighth time around the block, there it was!"

Maybe our simplistic view of temptation is of the naughty but nice category. We define temptation as touching something that we know isn’t really going to be good for us, but now and again we give in. From something as harmless as a wanton bar of chocolate or cream cake; to something a little more serious as the wanton woman or man and the illicit affair. Such temptations are quite blatant (all though that still doesn’t stop people from falling for them). As we will see, the temptations of Jesus are more subtle and seductive, threatening to pervert him from his true course and identity.

The temptations of faith hit at who we are in our humanity under God. They are the many voices of threat and seduction that seek to talk us out of being the church, the people of God, and the followers of Christ. They are voices that seek to talk us out of our God given humanness. I will offer Jesus as a guide and model and resource for how to resist the temptation, how to fend off those voices and how to have deliberate strategies to be who we are called by God to be.

Matthew’s account of the temptation of Jesus is a bridge between earlier chapters which establish Jesus identity and later chapters which relate his public ministry. The primary interest in this chapter is what sort of Messiah Jesus will be.

There are echoes of the story of Adam being tempted in the Garden of Eden. Matthew has already established that Jesus is God’s son – through his genealogy and the voice at his baptism. Like Adam his life comes directly from God. The devil will set out to challenge the nature of Jesus identity as God’s son rather than the fact of it. ‘If you are God’s son then you’ll do this…’ is the subtle temptation, seeking to cause Jesus to reinterpret and pervert his role, exploiting it for personal gain. Jesus obedience under trial, established before his ministry begins, will undo the disobedience of Adam

There are echoes of the story of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness under the leadership of Moses. Jesus’ faithful journey into the wilderness will undo the unfaithfulness of the Israelites. The Israelites sought to put God to the test; Jesus submits to be tested himself. Will Jesus keep the commands and live not just by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. His scriptural answers to the devil’s seductions are all drawn from the books of the Bible that describe the Israelites wanderings in the wilderness.

Three times the devil tests Jesus by asking him to seize power and use it for his own personal benefit. Three times Jesus chooses to serve not self but God. Let’s look at each of these temptations in turn.

From the outset, one of the unsettling features of this story is that it is the Spirit of God who has led Jesus into the wilderness. It is God who leads Jesus into this time of trial, not the devil. Our faith can be tested at many times, and sometimes it may be God testing us.

Have we got the right heart? Have we got the strength and resolve to go through with our convictions?

Climate Crisis is constantly in the news. Clare spoke last week at Minchinhampton Baptist Church on the issues and she quoted the American environmental lawyer and climate change adviser Gus Speth “I used to think that top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that thirty years of good science could address these problems. I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy, and to deal with these we need a cultural and spiritual transformation. And we scientists don’t know how to do that.”

Climate activist Greta Thunberg who was in Bristol yesterday said’ People are more scared of the change needed to prevent catastrophic climate change than they are of catastrophic climate change itself.

Create in me a clean heart O God and renew a right spirit within me. Lent is a time to look at our hearts, our motivations, our directions.

The story of Jesus as a guide, model and resource for a different humanity situates Jesus in this way. He fasted for forty days and nights. He was under a rigorous discipline of resistance. He had been led out into the wilderness. It was a place where many characters of the Bible such as Elijah, John the Baptist and Paul went to gather for their work. It was a disciplined withdrawal and regular retreat in order to break the familiar linkages and dependencies and loyalties. Life could be seen more clearly and those things that seek to soak off our resolve and our good intentions thrown off.

As soon as Jesus was hungry from fasting, when he was vulnerable, the voices began their work. The voices always come to us when we are vulnerable and exposed, thinking maybe this time we will give in. The voice wants to seduce Jesus (and us) away from our God given humanity. The story does not envisage Jesus engaged in conversation with a visible figure to whom he could talk one to another; the devil’s voice appears as a string of natural ideas in his head. I can’t settle for you the question of what form the devil takes, except to say that the voices are everywhere, cunning and dangerous to the health of your faith. They are plausible, attractive, and make, as we would say, a lot of sense.

Here was Jesus hungry and the voice said ‘make some bread for yourself’. God can’t want his beloved son to be famished with hunger, can he? Jesus is not without resources to resist such voices. He resorts to scripture. He 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) but by quoting scripture.

He realizes that to hold for our God given humanity, you cannot make it up on the spot but you must be ready with a thought through response steeped in your faith tradition, the wisdom of the ages. How much do we need to teach and guide our children to stay true to God and reject the seductions of the age? How well do we know our Bibles, that in whatever testing situation we could draw on biblical help and wisdom?

Jesus is hungry from fasting and is offered magic bread. But he says ‘man does not live on bread alone’. He says there is more to me than bread, than money, more than profit, more than commodity, more than exchange value.

In this familiar one liner – man does not live by bread alone – Jesus recalls the entire long sermon from Deuteronomy 8 in which Moses warns Israel about the temptations of being settled and well off.

When you get settled, says Moses, and you are rich and you get complacent and self sufficient and self congratulatory, remember an earlier time, remember those dangerous times when you and your family did not have enough and did not know from where the next meal was coming, close to starving, as hungry as you are when you fast … and remember that God gave you food, just enough. What you learned to do was live by God’s promises of sustenance and well-being that you could not touch or store up. The voice knows that affluence seduces to amnesia. Affluence can mean you forget God, forget who you are.

I read the story of Dan Price[[1]](#endnote-1) an American entrepreneur, who in 2015, as the boss of a card payments company in Seattle introduced a $70,000 minimum salary for all of his 120 staff - and personally took a pay cut of $1m. Five years later he's still on the minimum salary, and says the gamble has paid off.

Dan Price was hiking with his friend Valerie in the Cascade mountains that loom majestically over Seattle, when he had an uncomfortable revelation.

As they walked, she told him that her life was in chaos, that her landlord had put her monthly rent up by $200 and she was struggling to pay her bills.

It made Price angry. Valerie, who he had once dated, had served for 11 years in the military, doing two tours in Iraq, and was now working 50 hours a week in two jobs to make ends meet.

"She is somebody for whom service, honour and hard work just defines who she is as a person," he says.

Even though she was earning around $40,000 a year, in Seattle that wasn't enough to afford a decent home. He was angry that the world had become such an unequal place. And suddenly it struck him that he was part of the problem.

At 31, Price was a millionaire. His company, Gravity Payments, which he set up in his teens, had about 2,000 customers and an estimated worth of millions of dollars. Though he was earning $1.1m a year, Valerie brought home to him that a lot of his staff must be struggling - and he decided to change that.

Inspired by his Christian faith he decided that everyone should get paid the same and have enough income to be happy and fulfilled and therefore enjoy life. You sort out the physical bread – now you are ready for the spiritual bread.

Price said: "People are starving or being laid off or being taken advantage of, so that somebody can have a penthouse at the top of a tower in New York with gold chairs. "We're glorifying greed all the time as a society.

Man shall not live on bread alone

Listen to some verses from Deut 8: ‘When you have plenty to eat and live in fine houses ... do not become proud and forget the Lord your God. .. Nor must you say to yourself ‘my own strength and energy have gained me this wealth’. Remember it is the Lord your God it is he who gives you strength to be prosperous. If you forget the Lord your God and go after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them, I give you a solemn warning that you will certainly be destroyed.

And from the words of Jesus … ‘what does it profit a man that he should gain the whole world and yet forfeit his soul?’

Physical needs and wants are important, but loyalty to God and God’s ways are more important still. The bottom line is not our own comfort, our own prosperity, our standard of living, the profit margin, personal gain. The bottom line is loyalty to God and God’s ways which takes us beyond a concern for our own little lives and into the well-being of God’s world and God’s people.

Then the voice says ‘cheat a little, split your loyalties, worship me a little on the side and I will give you everything’. And perhaps he would have. 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.

Jesus has got Moses from Sinai ringing in his ear once more. ‘You shall worship only the Lord your God and serve him alone’. No compromise, no half way faith, no divided loyalty, because divided loyalty will give you everything you want, except your true God given self, and that comes with an undivided loyalty to the giver of your life.

Then the voice invites Jesus to check out if God can be trusted by jumping off a cliff, and seeing whether God will catch him, testing God by putting Jesus in a situation of jeopardy and forcing God to act. Trust in God doesn’t mean acting stupidly to force God into doing a spectacular rescue. 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 and service and finally death.

Jesus quotes Moses once again ‘You are not to put the Lord your God to the test’. The context in Deuteronomy is again when Israel is comfortable and guaranteed and complacent. And Moses says ‘obey what you know; don’t test what you do not know … obey the core commands of God that are readily at hand … love God and love your neighbour’. That is enough in any crisis.

In Deuteronomy Moses is quoting himself from an older story in the book of Exodus. Israel is in the wilderness after the departure from Egypt. Just like Jesus, they are in the wilderness. They want water because they are thirsty, because it is dry in the wilderness. They compete and accuse and finally Moses hits a rock and water comes gushing out and they drink. But Moses said ‘don’t push God to special miracles.’ Of course God can do this, but it is not your business to make God into a performer. Your part is not managing miracles. Your part is obedience and that is enough. That is what Jesus says to the voice. No special miracles, just obedient faith.

We are unlikely to be tempted in exactly the same way that Jesus was, but every Christian will be tested at the points that matter most in his or her life and vocation. It is a central part 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.

At the heart of our resistance to temptation is love and loyalty to the God who has already called us his beloved children in Christ, and who holds out before us the calling to follow him in the path which leads to true glory. In that glory lies the true happiness, the true fulfilment, which neither world, nor the flesh, nor devil can begin to imitate.

Harry Emerson Fosdick was one of the greatest American preachers of the last century. He described his preaching as counseling on a large scale. Few people knew that as a young seminary student he reached the breaking point after working one summer in a New York mission. He went home and was overcome by deep depression. One day he stood in the bathroom with a straight razor to his throat. He thought about taking his own life. And then -- and then he heard his father in the other room calling his name, "Harry! Harry!" It called him back. He never forgot it. It was like the voice of God calling him.

So I want to remind you today that in those times when you are in the wilderness, trying to find your way through, and when temptation comes and offers you the wrong answer, the wrong choice -- the wrong use of power, the way to popularity, the wrong kind of partnership -- then you remember that God has called your name: "This is my beloved son, my beloved daughter, in whom I am well pleased." And, you remember that because God has called your name. He will see you through.

I was moved to read the lent reflections drawn up by the team from the URC that went to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories last year. They recalled

One Palestinian Christian they met at the YMCA/YWCA in Bethlehem who said: ”We are the best enemy to have ... because we are very polite! We want to make peace with those who persecute us. We believe in non-violence. Our work to change this situation for our people is about bringing liberation for the Israelis too ... to free them to meet their Palestinian neighbour ... to free them from their sins. They are humans like us and we must love them ... which is hard. ‘Loving your enemy’ is so that we can resist evil. This person, this community, need help to see Palestinians as equals.’

They heard how a farmer was travelling home in the evening with his children when soldiers stopped them and demanded that they all have their papers checked. He deliberately spoke to his children in English so that the soldier would understand him too. He said to them: ‘Wake up, there is nothing to be afraid of. This young man is a human being just like us.” As the soldier was reminded of his humanity by the gentle words of a father to his children, he was released from the consequences that the gun in his hand might have dictated to him. A space for release and repentance was created and the family was allowed to travel on safely.

We need to remember who we are and whose we are.

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, enough to help him even if he succumbed to temptation.

Be aware of the voices in our world that will try to seduce you and take your God given humanity away from you. Be strong in the faith, resist the devil, turn to God once more. Grow through those test of faith.

A group of mountain hikers came across an old woodsman with an axe on his shoulder. "Where are you going?" they asked him.

"I'm headed up the mountain to get some wood to repair my cabin," replied the woodsman.

"But why are you going up the mountain?" they asked incredulously. "There are plenty of trees all around us here."

"I know," he said, "but I need strong timber and it grows only on the highest elevations, where the trees are tested and toughened by the weather around them. The higher up you go, the stronger the timber grows."

And that is what God desires for us - that through the winds of trial and the storms of temptation we would grow strong and live on a higher level - strong to resist the devil's urging, strong to serve God, and strong as we stand together in faith and service to one another.

Steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the Lord.

1. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-51332811> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)