**6th March 2022**

**First Sunday in Lent**

We come to praise the Father for his goodness,

to thank Jesus for his open hands of love,

and to seek the Holy Spirit’s blessing.

Come, therefore, and worship God.

**A prayer of approach**

God of the mountains and the sky,

of our minds and our hearts:

we look up to you in awe;

we reach out to you in longing;

we worship you in gratitude;

we sing to you in joy.

For you are our God,

and we are your people –

today and always.

Amen.

**A prayer of adoration**

Living God, creator and sustainer of the world,

we pledge to live well and with humility, in harmony with your creation;

we pledge to look to your Son for truth and guidance;

we pledge to make time for prayer and to be open to your Holy Spirit;

we pledge to read your Word,

and to be guided by the example of your Son.

We give you our lives to be transformed

as we worship and adore you,

and we thank you for your love.

Amen.

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

God of all creation,

forgive us when we lose perspective

and our world shrinks to our size, not yours.

Forgive us and nourish our vision.

Forgive us when we look away from you when we feel empty

and grasp what is not ours to take.

Forgive us and nourish our vision.

Forgive us when the choices we make are self-centred,

and we are indifferent to the needs of the wider community.

Forgive us and nourish our vision.

In Jesus’ name we pray.

Amen.

**Assurance of forgiveness**

God of all,

you transfigure our smallness with your greatness;

you unlock our limitations with your grace;

you calm our confusion with your faithfulness;

you forgive our mistakes with your generosity;

you inspire our dreams with your love –

enabling, empowering and encouraging us

to serve you and your whole creation

with all we are and all we have.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.

**Psalm 31**

In the crisis in Ukraine, Jewish and Christian faith leaders have, according to some sources, come together to pray Psalm 31, in which David calls out to God, their rock for refuge and declares that he has been shown God’s love ‘when I was beset as a city under siege’ (Psalm 31.21).

Anatoliy Raychynets, the Deputy General Secretary for the Bible Society in Ukraine says that Ukrainians are asking “serious questions” in the face of the crisis and Christians need to give them serious answers.

“Our answer, first of all, as a worker of Bible Society and as a pastor in church, is that we invite them to join praying the prayers in the Bible,” he says.

“In the stories in the Bible, we see stories of people going through different, difficult, challenging times. Times of war, of hunger. These are good stories that are teaching us.

“So when people come to us asking questions, we pray together. We encourage them to stand for peace and to pray for peace. We don’t pray for victory over our enemy. We pray that the diplomacy of Ukraine and the whole world will bring a solution. We pray that God’s miracle happens because we know that it must be a miracle to stop this. So we read the Bible with people and pray.”

**Luke 4.1-13**

The Greek word for tempted can also mean tested. Was Jesus tempted in the wilderness or was he tested in the wilderness? There is a subtle difference.

The Ukrainians are being tested t their limit. Should they fight or should they flee? Do they see themselves as Russian or Ukrainian? Russian disinformation and censoring of media allow just one voice to confuse and manipulate. It is a battle for their soul, their identity.

Identity is one of the key questions in our society. If people don’t believe in God, that they are God’s children, who are they? We have the popular notion that we can be who we want to be, we can create our own identity. But actually, we are shaped by forces in our media and popular culture and some of those identities are destructive, deceptive or out of reach. The chances of reaching fame and fortune are out of reach for most people – which if you have set your heart on that will leave you depressed and disillusioned and disappointed with life.

We can have a simplistic view of temptation 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, or the testings, of Jesus are more subtle and seductive, threatening to divert him from his true course and identity.

The testing of our faith 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.

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.

I will offer Jesus as a guide and model and resource for how to resist the temptation, how to get through the test and fend off those voices and how to have deliberate strategies to be who we are called by God to be.

Luke’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.

There are echoes of the story of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness under the leadership of Moses. Jesus’ 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.

It is sometimes said that the people most likely to abuse their power are those who are unsure whether they have any – people who assert themselves just to prove a point, or who feel so inferior that they must dominate others at all times for fear of being slighted themselves.[[1]](#endnote-1)

It is interesting to read the account of Jesus’ temptations as a struggle to come to terms with his power and to find the wisest way to use it. Jesus is confronted with real questions and temptations. There are no easy conclusions here – in a few verses we have the summary of many days of difficulty.

The devil’s insidious ‘If you are the Son of God’ (v.3) sounds like a goad to self-justifying action. The offer of a partnership deal – ‘If you will worship me, it will all be yours’ (v.7) – sounds just like the kind of shortcut to high status offered to talented young people, as long as they refrain from rocking the boat.

The temptation for Jesus to throw himself off the pinnacle of the Temple (and be miraculously rescued by angels) would certainly have been a supernatural way to avoid the reality of being human.

All the temptations seem to be about using power to gain instant results. They all assume that ‘Son of God’ is an instrumental title, a way to leverage power, rather than a relationship expressing intimacy and shared character. They imply ’Son of’ as in ‘Son and Heir’ rather than ‘Son of’ in the sense of ‘just like his father’.

It could be that these refusals by Jesus helped him to clarify the mission that he was actually accepting. It is after this that he returns to Galilee and begins his ministry, asserting that God has anointed him to bring good news to the poor.

Responding to the Ukraine situation in a Radio 4 Thought for the Day last Thursday, the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby reminded us not to give in to the fear provoked by uncertainty but instead remember that ‘the only certainty, is that we know that God does not change’. He said, ‘Let us find our resolution, our peace, our certainty not by screwing up our courage, but in the knowledge of the eternal arms that hold us.’.

Or, in the words of the title song of Lauren Daigle’s album, when she asks where God is, when darkness seems be winning and the world crumbling: ‘Look up, child‘. Look to the Lord. God is ‘not threatened by the war… not shaken by the storm… in control / Even in our suffering / Even when it can't be seen…’ So, look up, child!

That is what Jesus does, when he is tested and tempted by the devil in Luke 4.1-13.

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.

Though hungry from his 40 day fast, Jesus will not abuse God’s power to satisfy his immediate needs, even as the devil taunts him.

The voices always come to us when we are vulnerable and exposed, thinking maybe this time we will give in.

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?

Instead, he looks up, child of the Father, Son of God, to God’s bigger picture beyond that moment, and to His word, because ‘One does not live by bread alone.’ Our bodies need nourishment but not at the cost of our souls.

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.

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?

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.

Offered earthly power, he does not seize it, as some might now wish to grasp for the power to retaliate in the current crisis; instead he looks up to God again: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’

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 for example, 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.

We are promised ‘refuge’ (Psalm 91.2) by God. But God’s name is not to be used like a magic spell to whisk away our troubles. Paul reminds us that ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved’ (Romans 10.13) or as Psalm 91.15-16 promises, ‘When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble ... and show them my salvation.’ God will save, but it is not for us to assume when, or how, that will be accomplished. Instead, we must open our hands, our mouths and our eyes, to humble ourselves; to confess to God’s glory and our own weakness; and to pray for that salvation to be granted, to us, to Ukraine, and to the world.

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.

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.

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.

**Prayers of intercession**

As we enter the long weeks of Lent

and reflect on the sadness of its story;

when we look into our own hearts

and struggle to live by the responsibilities of our calling:

God of life,

Lead us through the wilderness.

When we feel lost and alone;

when trouble comes to our door

and we do not know how to face the future:

God of life,

Lead us through the wilderness.

When church needs to change;

when the way ahead seems threatening and unknown

and the usual certainties are gone:

God of life,

Lead us through the wilderness.

When we are lured by seductive voices

of power, money and control;

and we no longer know what is true:

God of life,

Lead us through the wilderness.

When our dreams and relationships lie shattered

by conflict, circumstance or cruelty

and we place our trust in what cannot fulfil us:

God of life,

Lead us through the wilderness.

When we invest more in developing weapons

than we do in the work of peace building –

more on what divides us than on the work of unity:

God of life,

Lead us through the wilderness.

When children are killed in adult wars;

when cities are full of marching boots;

when there is blood on the ground and the sounds of play are silenced:

God of life,

Lead us through the wilderness.

When we look at cities that lie deserted;

when citizens flee in fear for their lives

and our enemies encircle us:

God of life,

Lead us through the wilderness.

When we take more than we should;

when we do not treat the earth with kindness

and our habits and choices create a wasteland:

God of life,

Lead us through the wilderness.

When we find it hard to follow you;

when easier pathways beckon

and our strength fails:

God of life,

Lead us through the wilderness.

When we look ahead and all is dark: send us light.

When our hearts are dry, our pathway full of ash and dust,

send us water to renew our souls.

God of life,

Lead us through the wilderness.

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Feed us with the bread and wine that is your body

and the love of our companions in the way.

May we know your Spirit’s comfort

and trust that your love is enough.

In the darkness that surrounds us

and the pain that is to come,

until we see you face to face:

God of life,

Lead us through the wilderness. Amen.

**A sending out prayer**

Lord Jesus,

may we see you more clearly,

love you more dearly

and follow you more nearly

day by day.

Amen.

1. https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2022/118-march-april-2022-c/lent-1/bible-notes [↑](#endnote-ref-1)