**First Sunday in Lent**

**26th February 2023**

**Call to worship**

Let us come together before God, our consoler in distress.
Let us come together before God, our hiding place from troubles.
Let us come together before God, whose love surrounds us.
Let us rejoice in the Lord, our comforter and refuge.

**A gathering prayer**

When we get things wrong,
**we place our trust in you, Lord.**When we feel lost and alone,
**we place our trust in you, Lord.**When we are scared and hurting,
**we place our trust in you, Lord.**When we face the unknown,
**we place our trust in you, Lord,
relying on your endless love.
Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

God our stronghold and deliverer,
you are the only Lord, our God,
and we trust only in you.
Jesus you were tempted in the wilderness,
but you chose another way.
You were obedient to your Father.
You challenged the evil one and reign victoriously.
We bow before you today and sit at your feet,
worshipping only you.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of adoration**

Jesus Christ, our wonderful Lord and Saviour,
who when tempted in the desert, resisted,
in the world, but not of the world:
we worship and adore you.
When tempted by bread, you chose the word of God.
When tempted to be spectacular, you chose humility.
When tempted by riches and power, you chose servanthood.
Lord Jesus Christ, we worship and adore you.
**Amen.**

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

**A prayer of penitence**

Lord, we are sorry when we are tempted by all that the world has to offer us:
the temptation to be relevant and popular;
the temptation to be spectacular and successful;
the temptation for power and wealth and so many things.
We are sorry when we make the wrong decisions.
We are sorry for the temptations that lead to addiction, corruption and ultimately hurt other people.

Forgive us, Lord.
We seek your wisdom and discernment
to make better choices, to be rooted in you.
We thank you that, in our weaknesses, we can be made strong;
and that it is in weakness, in the desert times of our lives,
that amazing things can happen.
We ask in Jesus’ name.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Though tempted and though we make bad choices,
through the cross we are assured of healing and forgiveness.
In our weakness we are made strong.
We are forgiven and God gives us a blank canvas to start again,
to create together something beautiful.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Thank you, Lord, that it is never too late to turn around, never too late to start again.
Thank you that you have pulled us out of darkness into your marvellous light.
Thank you that though we are tempted, though we get things wrong, by your grace we are healed and restored.
Thank you that we are precious to you, that we know whose we are – we belong to you.
Thank you that your love for us is unconditional, we don’t have to prove anything.
And thank you that when we are tempted by the offerings of this world,
you are there to pick us up, wipe off the dust and set us back on the right path.
Thank you for the amazing love that you offer to each one of us.
**Amen.**



Standing firm

Practise resistance.

* Prepare temptation scenarios (examples below). In small groups, take turns to practise standing firm. One person tries to tempt and another practises how they could resist.
* After everyone has had a go, encourage them to discuss what temptations they find most challenging in daily life and how to make good choices.
W E S A

Sample temptation scenarios

*Provide a range of scenarios suitable for all ages, some lighter, some more serious:*

* You’re late driving to school to collect your child. It’s a 30mph limit but there’s no traffic. It wouldn’t hurt if you broke the speed limit a little… would it?
* You’ve forgotten your lunch and your friend has left their bag open, revealing a packet of muesli bars. They wouldn’t miss a couple… would they?
* You’re in the supermarket and have £5 left after getting your weekly food shop. Do you treat yourself or donate to the food bank?
* You were practising with a football in the house and accidentally broke an ornament. Do you own up or blame the cat?
* You’re on a strict diet, trying to lose weight for health reasons, but your grandmother just made you her ‘special supper’, your favourite. Do you refuse and hurt her feelings or give up your diet for the day?
* You find a wallet on the street with £100 in it, in £20 notes. You could hand it in to the police intact, but who would know if you kept just £20 for yourself?
* There’s a new person at school/work who has a stammer, and everyone else starts to make fun of them, mostly behind their back but some to their face. Your friends tell you that it’s just banter. What should you do?
* You’ve arranged to meet a friend at your favourite café when another friend calls, most upset. Their cat is very sick, and they ask you to go with them to the vet. What do you do?
* There’s a chocolate cake in the cupboard, baked for a special tea tomorrow. No one’s around and it’s calling to you. Surely one slice won’t hurt? (Think [Michael Rosen](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7BxQLITdOOc)**!)**

**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.

In her BBC Radio 4 series, [*Consumed by Desire*](https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/series/m0012qyb), the psychotherapist Philippa Perry pointed out that nowadays we get what we want, easily and instantly, whether strawberries in January, an Uber car, or constant connection via the digital world. Of course, this is not true for the many, here and throughout the world, who struggle even to subsist. But for those for whom the gap between urge and fulfilment can be very short, it may be difficult to acknowledge our real needs or to understand our deepest desires. Taking time to face his temptations, Jesus was able to separate what he did not really want from what he most deeply desired.

In Oscar Wilde’s *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Lord Darlington makes the quip, ‘I can resist everything except temptation’, and we are left in no doubt that this young man’s morals serve his self-interests. Wilde makes a more serious point when he says in *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, ‘Disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man’s original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and through rebellion’. We know that ‘obeying orders’ is no excuse for cruelty, and Jesus’ three responses to the devil are about his relationship with God – listening, trusting, and serving. This is much more than obeying authority.

The Greek word for ‘tempted’ can also be translated as ‘tested’, the point being that this isn’t an account of being tempted with chocolate during Lent! At the start of his ministry, Jesus faces a test of his core values, his wisdom and his nature. Will he use his power to satisfy his own needs or to meet those of others? Will he show off by putting himself in danger? Will he abuse his position to gain wealth and glory? Jesus’ answers help us when we face a test of our courage and choices: ‘It is written’ – each time he looks back to collective wisdom for guidance. Trust in God, and choose to do what is right, not just what brings you rewards.

Both readings follow the rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood. Adam and Eve move from innocence to knowledge and must face the world outside the protection of Eden. Jesus demonstrates integrity as he takes up his ministry. Similarly, in adolescence we separate from our carers, transition from childish to adult behaviours and inhabit our new role as full members of our community. Adolescence is a time of searching for identity. Who am I? What path do I follow? What is right? Lent is a time to enter our own ‘wilderness’ and review our answers: whom do we trust, as we make key choices? Can God trust us?

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?

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.

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.

We start with the most straightforward, (and often most insistent!) of temptations, those generated by our bodily appetites and needs[[1]](#endnote-1): the temptations to serve first our own creature comforts, to tend to our obsessions and addictions before we have even considered the needs of others. But then we move on to the deeper temptations to serve and feed, not just the body, but its driving ego, with its lust for power, the temptation to dominate in the kingdoms of this world. We may have overcome the first temptation only because we are captivated and driven by the second. We diet, and discipline our flesh in gyms and health-clubs, we submit our appetites to the dictates of personal trainers and three-month fitness plans, but only because we hope thereby to sharpen our image so as to shine and succeed in the world!

And then comes the last, the subtlest and worst temptation of all: the temptation to spiritual pride. We may rise above worldly ambition only to congratulate ourselves on how spiritual we have become, how superior to our fat-cat neighbours! The very disciplines and virtues designed to bring us closer to our saviour, to make us more available as ambassadors of his love become instead the proud possessions that separate us from the one whose strength is made perfect in weakness.

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.

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.

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.

**Prayers of intercession**

*Although written as three slightly longer prayers, you could also use them as a continuous prayer with a suitable response between each section.*

God of love these are testing times for our world.

It has been hard to witness yet another earthquake in Turkey and Syria this week. The pain and suffering of the people in both of these countries is unimaginable. We continue to pray for all of those who are grieving, all of those who are injured and all of those who have lost everything.

The grim anniversary of the war in Ukraine this week reminds us how fragile peace is. As people who know your divine peace we ask for peace in our world. We pray for the leaders of our world as they work out how to react to the violence and make decisions that will impact many people’s lives.

Finally, we pray for countries feeling the brutal impact of the climate, in particular Madagascar. As the world faces up to the climate crisis may we play our part in looking after creation and seek justice for people who are suffering as a result of dramatic climate changes. Help us to be part of the solution to the problems the world faces.

**Amen.**

God of love these are testing times for our country.

Many people are still really struggling with the cost of living. We pray for people who are finding day-to-day life hard. Thank you for those who are trying to help, for the foodbanks, advice centres and community interventions bringing some relief and hope. Give volunteers the energy and funds they need to keep going and help us as your people to look after those in need in our community.

The ongoing pay disputes continue to impact many people’s lives. We thank you for the discussions this week within the NHS, but we ask for resolution for the many other people, in different sectors seeking new pay deals. May people negotiate in good faith and find a way forward that will bring an end to the disputes.

Finally, we pray for our children as they navigate the complexities of social media and the internet. A new NSPCC report this week around the dangers for children and the abuse they suffer is upsetting. Please protect our children and young people. As a church may we work hard to safeguard all of the young people in our care and create safe spaces in which children can flourish and grow in their faith.

**Amen.**

God of love these are testing times for some of our friends and family.

We want to ask you to be with people in our communities who are suffering at the moment, with illness, grief or situations that are very difficult. We pray for friends and family struggling with mental health issues and depression.

*Invite people to pray quietly for specific people who are suffering or struggling.*

Help us when we are tested to do the right thing. Help us to make decisions that are full of grace and love. Help us to put our trust in you and be people others can trust.

**Amen.**



**A prayer for all ages together**

Teach the [BSL sign for Trust](https://www.signbsl.com/sign/trust) (edge of one hand on flat palm). Each time the word is said, make the sign.

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord!
Lord, help us to trust ourselves to do what is right.
Help us to trust each other for friendship and support.
Help us to trust in you when times are hard
For your love surrounds us when we trust in you.
**Amen.**



**A sending out prayer**

Let us go forth with the love of God surrounding us.
Let us go forth with the wisdom of God guiding us.
Let us go forth with our trust in God protecting us.
**Amen.**

1. <https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2015/02/18/from-the-word-in-the-wilderness-the-first-temptation/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)