

Sermon – 5th March – First Sunday of Lent

Temptation of Jesus *Matthew 4 v 1-11 Genesis 2 v 15-3 v7 Romans 5 v12-19*

Lessons to be learnt from the temptation of Christ

When the Chaplain told me of the readings I was to preach on today I thought no problem.

Temptation. I have a masters degree in temptation – but knowing about temptation and overcoming temptation is a different matter.

I am reminded of the story that is told of four priests who were relaxing together over a few be vies and their conversation got around to the subject of temptation and what tempted them. The one confided that he had always been something of a womaniser. The next said he had been tempted to embezzlement, sneaking a few pounds each week off the collection plate. The third said that betting on the gee gees was his weakness. When it got around to the forth priest to confess he said that he was prone to gossip and then he excitedly added would you please excuse me for a moment, I have some very urgent telephone calls to make.

When we come to look at the scripture readings on temptation we will learn far more by examining Jesus reactions and responses to temptation than concentrating on the devil's work.

But first we must believe in the existence of the evil one. The only sermon that I challenged from a previous Chaplain was when he preached on this gospel passage and said that he did not know for certain that there was an actual being called the devil. But I do not share his doubts because I have meet him many times in my life. More importantly Jesus believed in him as do the scriptures, variously naming him Satan, the adversary, devil, Lucifer, prince of the world, deceiver to name but a few.

The tempter entered scriptures way back in the book of Genesis that we read this morning. God had made creation and He saw that 'it was good'. And he made man in His own image to enjoy the goodness. But then up pops the tempter in the form of a snake. Now I do not mind if you do not necessarily share my fundamentalist views about Adam and Eve. But at least accept that there was a time when mankind shared in the holy life of God not weighed down by the incumbrancer of sin. And then there was a time when man became disobedient to God's instruction and so sin entered the world.

And ever since then man has struggled against temptation. Kings, judges and prophets all failed to get mankind back on track and still do. I do not need to give you a catalogue of mankind's current

sinfulness - just open your papers, tv or social media.

But then into this world came Jesus and so the tempter popped up again. He had already been at work since Jesus birth through the dastardly work of King Herod. But here he was faced to face with Jesus in the wilderness.

So what is it that we can we learn from how Jesus tackled this period of temptation? What can we learn to help us in our struggles?

The gospel recounts that the Lord faced three major temptations. Convenient for us as most sermons should have three major teaching points. Here we have at least three evidenced by the three challenges that Jesus faced. Without doubt there are many other lessons to be learnt but I am concentrating on just three.

The first of the temptations teaches us more about **when** temptation is likely to attack. Matthew records that Jesus had fasted for 40 days and forty nights. In any ones books this is a long time. This passage ends with the words and 'He was hungry'. This must have been the greatest understatement of all time. Nil by mouth on the day of an operation seems a long time, here we have 40 days. You know what it is like when you are at your weakest

point that the temptation to accept such an offer of bread is at its greatest.

When I was a boy I was taken to an overseas missions meeting where an elderly, diminutive lady was speaking about her call to the mission field. She worked as a humble parlour maid, undersized and ill-educated. But with great determination she was granted an interview at a missionary training school. Her hopes were dashed when her application was rejected and she was told that she was not smart enough to learn Chinese, the country she felt called to serve in. Go away and return to the safe option of your old job she was advised and possibly marriage and a comfortable life. After such a struggle this must have seemed a very easy and tempting option to take. But just like Jesus in the desert she was determined to stick to what she felt was her calling and at her own expense and with no training she found her way to China where she served with amazing results. That woman was Gladys Aylward whose amazing life story was captured in the feature film 'Inn of the sixth happiness'.

But it is not only at the low points of life that temptation attacks. If we had read the chapter that precedes today's gospel reading we would have read of Jesus baptism when we are told 'The

heavens opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and a voice from heaven saying this is my son in whom I am well pleased.' This was a great high point for Jesus yet immediately following we are told that He was led into the wilderness to face this time of tempting. You see it is not only at low points in life we are tempted but also at high points.

In his book Soul Survivor Philip Yancy recounts how Martin Luther King Jr found himself, at a very young age, was at a high point of his life leading the civil rights movement in Montgomery Alabama. All eyes were on him. He was only just getting to grips with his role as a young local minister and now, by default, he had been catapulted into this national leadership role. Like Jesus he must have felt thrilled to be recognised to undertake this important role. But like for Jesus no soon had he experienced that high he too was brought down to earth when he reflected on the immensity and danger of the work to both him and his family. He said that he got to a point where he could not take it any more and was all but tempted to throw in 'the towel.

The gospel passage then recounts how the devil took Jesus to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple ⁶ and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, “He will instruct his angels concerning you and their hands will bear you up”. This time we see the devil putting God to the test and at the same time testing Jesus faith in the Father. But what is more significant for us is the way Jesus rebuffs his temptation. He quotes scripture, scripture which he knows very well. Jesus addresses his tempter with further scripture. “Again it is written You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.” I have a great admiration for people who can recount bible passages both by chapter and verse. I struggle to remember my own mobile phone number so I am hopeless at this. But to know the truths and promises of the bible is to have great power to meet the challenge of the tempter. In Hebrews it says that the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword. Spending time in reading and digesting his word is time well spent in preparing to face these times of temptation.

And finally in the gospel passage we are told the devil took Jesus to a very high mountain. Do you notice that as each temptation was presented the challenge was both at a higher place and the odds got greater. Desert to temple to temple to the highest mountain. From

bread to Kingdoms the prize became greater. This last temptation was a very real temptation for Jesus. He knew he was sent to tell mankind that the kingdom of heaven was near, was breaking into this world. But he also knew that it was to require him to take the sins of the world on his back in a cruel and painful way. Here was the devil suggesting that he could skip all that pain and separation from the Father if he would only bow down and worship him then all the kingdoms of the world would be given to him now – no need to go through that pain and separation. Now there was an idea, there was a real temptation. I wonder how often we attempt to take the easy option and then excuse our action by seeking to rationalise them. To return to the example of Martin Luther King he could have on that night of temptation rationalised them by saying “God I have responsibility to my wife and family I cannot put their lives at risk by assuming this national role”. Or perhaps he could say “I am a new pastor with a new flock. I can’t leave them floundering. My responsibility must be to them first”. How often are we tempted to take the easy way out by excusing ourselves with seemingly logical arguments?

But Jesus did not take the easy option. And it was at this point the Father stepped in and we are told ‘Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and

ministered to him.’ This too can happen to us . Jesus promised that he would “pray to the Father, and He will give us another Comforter, that He may abide with us for ever”. Here is our ultimate help at times of temptation. To return for a final time to the story of Martin Luther and his temptation to give up the national fight for justice. At this low point King writes ‘it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness, stand up for justice, stand up for truth and lo I will be with you even until the end of the world’.

Let us during this time of Lent learn to go forward like Martin Luther, like Gladys Aylward , like Jesus and face and overcome whatever temptations we are to face to the glory of God and with His help.

Amen