

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH LENT 1 YEAR C 6 MARCH 2022.

The season of Lent has begun. I was asked on Friday what I'd given up for Lent. My response was that like most clergy I had actually taken on more, with Stations of the Cross and Study Groups to lead. Lent developed in the Church as a time of preparation for observing the events at the end of Jesus' life on earth: his suffering, death and resurrection. We are heading for Holy Week and Easter.

Preparation is a key theme of the gospel reading we've just heard. Jesus is preparing to start his public ministry: that time of teaching, healing and challenging accepted ways, that led to his execution. We call today's passage 'The temptations of Christ' or 'The temptations in the wilderness.' These titles are not altogether helpful, because temptation is a rather broad term. It has a mild sense as in being tempted to have a cream cake. It also has a strong sense, and this is often the case in the bible, meaning to be tested, put on trial. Jesus' temptations have this strong sense: they are tests of what he is here for. In fact, the word 'test' is used in the last verse of today's passage: 'When the devil had finished every test...'

The temptations happen immediately after Jesus' baptism, at which the Holy Spirit descended upon him, and a voice from heaven declared, "You are my beloved Son...". Now Jesus is 'led by the Spirit in the wilderness.' This suggests that the temptations he goes through are not accidental but are part of God's plan. The devil begins two of the temptations with the challenge, "If you are the Son of God...". The temptations are a working out of what it means for the man Jesus, living on earth, to be the Son of God, working out what was declared at his baptism.

The first temptation Jesus faces is to turn a stone into a loaf of bread. After all, he is famished. Quoting scripture, Jesus says there is more to life than eating. He is engaged in a spiritual struggle, not just what to do about a bodily desire. He does not satisfy his own need. Later in his ministry, however, he would feed a hungry crowd. This should get us thinking if we are doing what we can to meet the needs of other people, or if we always put our own needs first. I'm not suggesting we should empty our pantries, fridges and freezers, and give everything to the YMCA. We have to survive, or we'll be no use to anyone. Serving others goes beyond food, of course. I'm thinking of a mother who spent 17 years totally dedicated to caring for her disabled son.

The second temptation is to worship the devil and be given earthly authority and glory. It is questionable whether earthly power is the devil's to give. Temptations often fail to deliver what we hope. Be that as it may, Jesus the Son of God is not here to seek earthly glory. He would have a

different relationship with the world. He would weep over Jerusalem because the city was on course to destruction (19.41). He would ask people what it would profit them to gain the whole world if they lose their true selves in the process (9.25). Talking of bodily needs – food, drink, clothing – he would say that the nations of the world seek these things, but his followers are to seek the kingdom of God (12.30). We, of course, live in the world, but how conscious are we of our life in God's kingdom? It's a reality beyond seeing and touching, but it's where our deepest desires should be formed.

The third temptation is to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem. The devil, quoting scripture, assures Jesus that angels will bear him up on their wings. But Jesus will not use divine privilege for his own sake, doing something unnecessary to see if God will save him. Three years later he would be lifted up on a cross outside Jerusalem. There's an echo of the devil's words in the taunt of the soldiers on that occasion: "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" (23.37). Jesus did not save himself. His last words were, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit!": God's hands, not the miraculous wings of angels. Jesus is a model for us of trusting God, rather than putting him to the test. Yet how often do we assume that if we do something, God ought to respond in a particular way? God doesn't do bargains.

So Jesus' responses to the devil's temptation show how he would reveal himself as Son of God in his life to come: in the way he taught and ministered. Jesus' power over evil would be shown in many of his encounters later in the gospel; here the conflict is presented in a single encounter. His responses provide us with a good programme for Lent, and indeed for the rest of our lives: that we should put others' needs before our own, that we should examine where our desires lie, and that we should trust in God.