

**Sermon 9 March 2025, First Sunday of Lent, Great St Mary's, Cambridge, Revd Canon Jutta Brueck**

**Deut 26. 1-11**

When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, 'Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us.' When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, you shall make this response before the Lord your God: 'A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.' You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.

**Romans 10. 8b-13**

But what does it say? 'The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart' (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, 'No one who believes in him will be put to shame.' For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

**Luke 4. 1-13**

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone." '

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." '

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you", and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." ' Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." ' When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Today, on this first Sunday of Lent we are again invited to enter the wilderness with Jesus, for forty days, in preparation for Easter; to journey with Jesus to the cross and beyond and to listen to the voice of God, in prayer, through fasting and almsgiving.

We are living in turbulent times, in a world that seems to become more unpredictable by the day. We observe forces at work and gaining sway that appear inimical to the values we hold as Christians – values of justice, of compassion, of caring for the poorest and most vulnerable in the world, and for our planet. We will be wondering where God is in this, and how we can be agents of God's values and kingdom.

I am beginning this season of Lent with a heightened sense of how urgent/important it is for me, for us to hear the voice of the scriptures, calling us to return to the Lord, to come with contrite hearts and a broken spirit, allowing God in our lives to transform us, by observing the ancient Spiritual practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. The emphasis on observing Lent starts with the personal, which, is of course, the only place to start. But, paying attention to the scriptures, we do so as part of communities, in which we encourage one another, discern together God's voice and walk faithfully together, with God. Lent is not so much about a personal improvement programme, but about recognising our part in the sinfulness of the world. It is about, as we pray in the Lord's prayer, the coming of God's kingdom.

Our scriptures are full of stories with people struggling to find and create stable homelands in which to live safely, with justice and good neighbours. They are full of examples where the leaders of nations and tribes either fear God and heed the commandments, or more often, turn their back to God, by pursuing their own power and wealth at the expense of their people.

The gospel reading today from Luke's gospel, in which Jesus is led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit, to be tested for forty days resembles stories of both Moses (Exod 34:28) and Elijah (see 1 Kings 19:8) in the Old Testament. The number forty resonates with Israelite history, when the Israelites spent forty years wandering in the wilderness before being given the promised land.

Luke's account of Jesus' time in the wilderness draws for its scripture quotes from the book of Deuteronomy, from which our first reading today is also taken. At the start of this season of Lent, the passage from Deuteronomy contains an important message for us:

The Israelites are exhorted not to forget their origins or the source of their lives and wealth, when they find themselves prosperous in the promised land. Remember...when you are rich and settled, do not forget your Lord God; regularly offer thanksgiving and worship, and include those who don't own land, like the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, in your celebrations of the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.

Rituals of remembering helped the Israelites, they help us to inhabit our appropriate place in the world; to remember our own vulnerability and to reach out to those who possess little. An important

message for our time too. When we are well off and feel in charge of our lives and our destinies, we easily forget to regularly turn to God in thanksgiving.

It is not surprising that Jesus, at his baptism, having just received the affirmation that he is God's beloved Son, is led into the wilderness, into that place where we discover who we truly are and who God is. The Spirit's leading reminds us that this story is part of the divine plan; the devil is an evil and powerful figure, but never capable of acting outside the scope of God's purpose.<sup>1</sup>

The **first** temptation, about bread and stones is focussed on Jesus' personal needs, given his hunger, but Jesus' response suggests something more is going on.

Just like the Israelites in the wilderness, Jesus now endures a kind of testing that will be central to his relationship with God and God's people. Jesus is repeating the experience of Israel, but rather than complaining and hankering after the flesh-pots of Egypt, he trusts God. He exercises self-control, not just for himself, but for the much greater calling that will unfold.

The **second** temptation in Luke is the political one. While our translations are likely to render Matthew's (4:8) and Luke's phrases identically as "the kingdoms of the world," Luke has the word *oikoumene*—literally "the inhabited world" . Luke uses *oikoumene* quite often, including in the Acts of the Apostles, to refer to the Roman Empire itself, less as a political structure perhaps than as a social reality, the environment in which the Gospel is spread. This temptation is about human society and authority.

Here, the devil claims to have authority over the nations, and he demands worship, literally 'prostration' from Jesus. Jesus sees through the devil's scheme and rejects his offer, knowing that the authority the devil is claiming is not his, and he certainly does not deserve worship.

Jesus' response 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him' comes again from Deuteronomy (6:13) where the Israelites were instructed about life in the promised land. Moses warns them, not to serve other Gods and forget YHWH who brought them to the land, when they find themselves blessed with prosperity in the promised land.

In the last temptation Jesus is taken to Jerusalem, which in Luke's gospel has already featured twice, first, at the presentation in the temple, and when the 12 year-old Jesus visited Jerusalem with his parents. Jerusalem is the place where real power lies, and this time the devil even resorts to quoting scripture to entice Jesus to perform a stunt to proof he is the Son of God.

Jesus reply not to "put the Lord your God to the test" is again from Deuteronomy 6, where Moses warns the people not to forget their God when they will be settled and well off. His warning "Do not put the

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Andrew McGowan, Berkley Divinity School, for the insights on Luke's version of the temptations

Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah” (Deut 6:16) refers to the time in the wilderness when the people moaned & quarrelled, leading to Moses striking the rock, which then produced water.

Instead, Jesus is withstanding the temptation to prove that he is the Son of God – he could have easily done it! Those forty days in the wilderness combined with the testing by the devil will have clarified his identity and mission, prepared him for what lies ahead. He will be tested again, and it will be costly.

The questions at the centre of these temptations are as relevant to our world as they were in Jesus’ time. Exercising self-control for the sake of a more generous and human world; worshipping only God in a world which trusts more in human power and achievement; leading a life of self-giving love that seeks the will of God and trusts more in God than in self – are the invitations that emerge from this gospel.

The devil presented himself as the one who has the power. Jesus saw through that, he did not fall into the trap of taking the quick way out.

He was faithful to his calling to live the reality of human existence, making choices, enjoying the beauty and gift of life, building community, as well as enduring great suffering.

Our journey through Lent is journey with Jesus to the cross and beyond, and on the way, to recognise where we put our trust in false gods; where we place our hope more in human power and structures, rather than embracing the messy reality of living in God's kingdom, as people of faith. Each one of us is invited to a faithful observance of Lent, but we are not journeying as disconnected individuals. We are called to journey together, with faith and love and hope, in these turbulent times trusting that good overcomes evil.

Closing prayer: words from today’s collect:

Gracious God, as you know our weakness, so may we know your power to save. Amen.