

Lent 1

Luke 4:1-13

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Romans 10:8b-13

Over the years I've served in ordained pastoral ministry, I've ministered to people from very different backgrounds with very different types of need. There have been folk with various physical illnesses, those suffering from varying degrees of mental illness, those who find themselves homeless, folk who are seeking employment, those who are caring for loved ones long-term, and many who have been bereaved. And I have to say that one thing I've been very cautious about is saying too freely to people, 'Yes, I know what you're going through' or 'I know how you feel.' Because in certain cases, I wouldn't have been through such an experience myself, and so it would have been rather insincere of me to pretend that I really knew how they felt. Whereas in other instances, I could genuinely say that I could indeed identify with them in what they were going through, because it had been part of my *own* life journey too.

Today, as we continue on our journey through Lent, we focus on one particular way in which the *Lord Jesus* identifies with *us* in *our* situation – namely, what it means for us, as human beings, to face temptation. The temptations occur right at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. He had just been baptised by John the Baptist, the Holy Spirit had descended upon him, and the voice from heaven had declared, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Jesus had been declared the Messiah, the Son of the living God; but the question remained, 'What kind of Messiah was he to be?' People had their *own* expectations, but what was *God's* intention for his Son? And so in these temptations, the Lord is confronted with three different paths which he could follow – three different directions his ministry could take - all of which were *not* the way intended for him by his Father.

First of all, there was the temptation to turn stones into bread. It was a natural temptation for Jesus,

given the fact that he was fasting and therefore hungry; as Luke notes, “he was famished.” It’s so often when we’re at our lowest ebb that temptation rears its ugly head. But this temptation was not simply about Jesus’ own immediate needs. What Jesus is faced with here is the temptation to become something of a glorified social worker, addressing merely the people’s *material* needs. Yes, he certainly does this to some extent; the feeding of the 5000 is a case in point - and we mustn’t lose sight of the social implications of the gospel message. But there’s a lot more to Jesus’ mission than this. Jesus actually meets people’s deepest *spiritual* needs – he is the Saviour of the world who saves us from our sin and brings us back into a right relationship with God. And, if the *Lord’s* ministry cannot be reduced to mere social work, then neither can the *message* that the Church proclaims today. *Just* engaging in social outreach in the community is not enough. Our proclamation must meet both the material *and* spiritual needs of individuals – it’s about ‘soup *and* salvation’ (as the Salvation Army declare) – for we cannot live by bread alone. As today’s Post-

Communion Prayer puts it, ‘teach us always to hunger for him who *is* the true and living bread’ – we need to be pointing people to Jesus in whom *all* our hungers are satisfied.

Then secondly, Jesus is led up a mountain and shown all the kingdoms of the world, and the devil says that he would give them to Jesus if only he worshipped him. It’s the temptation to be some kind of a political ruler, something which a lot of people at the time were expecting the Messiah to be. But this was *not* the right path for Jesus, either. Yes, Christ is indeed a King, but his kingship is to be over *all* things – he’s not subject to anyone else. And so he rejects this false path by declaring, “Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.” In fact, this reminds us of the way in which temptation is so often about drawing us away from the true worship of the living God. In our Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy, the Israelites who are about to enter the Promised Land are to worship God by bringing to the place of worship the first fruits of their harvest. In doing so, they are acknowledging that what has been given to

them is not an automatic right, but rather it's theirs by God's grace. Their only response to God's gracious provision must be to worship him alone. Down the centuries, though, the people of Israel largely failed in this – frequently giving in to the temptation to be drawn away from God, becoming disobedient to him. But Jesus, the perfect Israelite, in his complete obedience to his Father, succeeds where Israel had failed. We too must not give in to the temptation to be drawn away from worshipping and obeying the Lord alone.

And thirdly, there's the temptation for Jesus to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the Temple, because, as the devil (misusing Scripture) says, the angels would come to his aid. So, was Jesus to be some kind of a popular entertainer, impressing the crowds with his amazing acts? Jesus would certainly have had more than his 15 minutes of fame if he had gone down this path – it would have been an easy way to become popular; after all, crowds are sure to gather where some extraordinary spectacle is taking place. But the Lord firmly rejects this way too

– “Do not put the Lord your God to the test”, he declares. It was *not* through being the popular entertainer that Christ would gain the crown, but rather through the suffering of the Cross.

So, in each case, the Lord Jesus successfully resists the temptations which come his way. He chooses to be wholly obedient to his Father's will. The path he is to follow is the way of the suffering servant – the King who came not to *be* served, but *to* serve, and to give his life that we might live. It's important to emphasise this. Because the three temptations which came Christ's way were all basically attempts to reduce him to someone *less* than he really is – a mere provider of social and material needs, a revolutionary political leader, a popular entertainer. They're all a long way from the *real* truth of who Jesus is and what he came to do. In our reading from his Letter to the Romans, Paul declares that *Jesus is Lord*. He is Lord of all, not through following the paths of the tempter, but through being obedient to his Father – not seeking the easy way out, but submitting himself to suffering and death on a cross.

And we, in turn, need to be faithful in acknowledging and proclaiming that Christ – now risen, ascended and glorified - is indeed Lord over all; and that includes, to start with, allowing him to be Lord over every aspect of *our* lives.

Now each one of *us* face temptation every day. I'm don't simply mean someone sticking a cream cake in front of us, and then giving into the temptation! That's more to do with our own preoccupations about not putting on weight, than it is about desiring to live a godly life. Much more importantly, I mean those temptations which frequently come our way and which we so easily give in to, and which get in the way of our relationship with the Lord. We're reminded that Jesus can identify with us in our situation. He too faced temptation as *we* constantly do, though remaining sinless. As the Letter to the Hebrews declares, ".....we do not have a high priest who is *unable* to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested/tempted *as we are*, yet *without sin*." It's through the power of Christ, the sinless One, who

brings us forgiveness through his death on the Cross, that we're able to resist temptation and to lead holy, godly lives. In the Garden of Eden, Adam had failed – he disobeyed God when temptation came his way. So too, the people of Israel had failed when they had been tested in the desert for 40 years. But Christ succeeded where Adam and Israel had failed. And so through Christ, we too have the power to overcome. The thing is, if we're really serious about progressing in our Christian life, then we simply can't carry on allowing ourselves to give in to those persistent temptations which come our way, and which get in the way of our relationship with the Lord.

Each time I go into London, I'm always struck by the way in which it's constantly in a state of transformation – a familiar building demolished, another one going up somewhere else, new bits of railway line emerging. Perhaps we can say the same for many places with which we're particularly familiar, including Worthing. In the same way, if we have committed our lives to Christ, then we

ourselves ought to be people who are being continually *transformed* by the Holy Spirit, becoming more like Jesus as we journey on.

I don't know how you feel about giving up things for Lent. As much as we perhaps would like our prime motivations for doing so to be *spiritual*, more often than not, something like giving up chocolate perhaps has just as much to do with wanting to lose weight, than anything more pious. But whether or not we choose to give up anything during Lent, and whatever our motivation for doing so, the one thing we should *all* be aiming to do is to cast aside those things which come between us and the Lord. Or more particularly, to allow *God* to deal with those persistent sins – those temptations which we give into so easily. So, this Lent and beyond, whilst we might aim to *take off* a few pounds by giving up chocolate, let's above all aim to *put on* a renewed desire for godliness.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you understand all the temptations which we face in life, as you have been there before. Help us, by the power of your Spirit, to resist the many temptations which come our way and to grow in your likeness, day by day. Amen.