

Dorset South & West Circuit - Written Service for Sunday 6 March 2022 – 'Temptation' - by Revd David Cuckson

Opening Sentences (*Psalm 91:14-16*)

God speaks words of comfort through the Psalmist:

Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honour them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.

HYMN Singing the Faith 238 (*James Edmeston*)

1. Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us
o'er the world's tempestuous sea;
guard us, guide us, keep us, feed us,
for we have no help but thee,
yet possessing every blessing
if our God our Father be.

2. Saviour, breathe forgiveness o'er us;
all our weakness thou dost know;
thou didst tread this earth before us,
thou didst feel its keenest woe;
tempted, taunted, yet undaunted,
through the desert thou didst go.

3. Spirit of our God, descending,
fill our hearts with heavenly joy,
love with every passion blending,
pleasure that can never cloy;
thus provided, pardoned, guided,
nothing can our peace destroy.

Prayer

God our Father, life pulls us in many directions, and present many possibilities. Sometimes we do not know which way to turn. There are so many claims upon our time, so many demands for our attention, that the very range of choices before us drives us to distraction. It is then that we need you. Yours is the ultimate claim on our lives; help us to listen for it in all the other claims that are made on us. Because we cannot do everything, help us to get our priorities right, to know what you want us to do now, and what we have to leave. May the stress and strain of life not break us, but make us stronger, for Jesus' sake. **Amen.**

We know that too often we realise too late that we have failed to match up even to our own expectations for ourselves, and that sometimes other people have suffered as a result. We can only say sorry, but are grateful for the promise of God's forgiveness, which we have witnessed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Now we pray that we may hear God's word for us now as we consider words of Scripture, and that our minds may be enlightened by the Holy Spirit. For Christ's sake. **Amen.**

Luke 4:1-13 (NRSVA)

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.

Reflection

That Jesus took himself off into the wilderness for a period at the start of his ministry is easy to accept at its face value – it makes perfect sense to have a spell of isolation as part of the preparation for a mission that would be bound to have its challenges and even suffering. Where we run into difficulties is when we read the details of the Gospel account with our minds trained to address matters in a modern, matter-of-fact, way. I know that quite a lot of people are into fantasy stories, in film or in books, although I myself am not among them, but in any case we are not dealing with fantasy here. What we have here are elements of myth, and myth is quite different from fantasy, or fairy-tale. George Caird, in his little Pelican Commentary on Saint Luke, had some helpful comments here. He wrote that 'Myth is a pictorial way of expressing truths which cannot be expressed so readily or so forcefully in any other way', and this is how we must face the figure of the devil in our reading and the description of the devil's encounter with Jesus. Do not get hung up on the portrayal of the devil in classical art – neither should you do the opposite and dismiss it all as fantasy - rather look for the truths that are expressed in the Gospel account.

Dr Caird identified five distinct truths that are safeguarded by the mythological figure of the devil. First, evil is real and potent, experienced as a power which can get a grip on human life and society. Secondly, evil is personal, in that it is found in an individual's choice between following the way perceived as the will of God or rejecting that way. Thirdly, evil can often be seen as distorted good, in that creation is seen as essentially the 'good gifts of God' whereas evil is where these good gifts of God are misused or perverted; this concept is sometimes expressed in the description of the devil as a fallen angel. Fourthly, evil can sometimes masquerade as good, which gives rise to the description of the devil as the 'slanderer' who misleads people by telling them lies about God. Fifthly and lastly, evil is the enemy and needs to be identified as such, for example where certain behaviour is defended as normal, where a reasonable person can see that it harms individuals and society as a whole, where, in religious terms, it spoils God's creation.

So Jesus, in his time in the wilderness, faces up to the choices he has to make as he embarks on his ministry. He needs to find the will of God, the way forward for him. And in the temptations that confront him, as described in the Gospel stories, he considers options that appear to have some positive merit, some benefits for his ministry, but where the outcome would ultimately be the opposite of good, even evil.

First he experiences hunger. In itself fasting can be endured for a period, but for Jesus, with a message of love and care to proclaim, personal hunger would inevitably give rise to sympathy and concern for all those people living with hunger not just for forty days but throughout their lives. Perhaps meeting their needs should be a priority for the Messiah? Would it not be a good role to devote himself to meeting this most basic of human needs? Yes, it would be good, but here, for the Messiah in particular, the good can be the enemy of the best. Yes, people need to be fed but, if this is all that is done, they are at the same time stripped of their dignity as human beings. Offering true fulfilment in life feeds the spirit as well as the body. 'One does not live by bread alone.'

So first, Jesus' compassion is challenged. Then secondly, his commitment to the will of God, or God's way, is questioned. The image is a vivid one of Jesus being able to contemplate all the kingdoms of the world in one overall perspective. Jesus grew up in the Roman Empire, where his own homeland was just a small part of what was most of the then known world, all ruled ultimately by one man. A decree by the emperor was conveyed throughout the empire and would be obeyed throughout the empire. What could Jesus not achieve if he had power like that? Perhaps even more than the party of Zealots dreamed of just for his homeland. There was a vision current at the time for this kind of Messiah, who would lead an earthly revolt, with the promise of freedom. But worldly power as the motivating ambition inevitably corrupts in the end. This is not God's way and it ends up with worshipping that which is not God. 'Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.'

Thirdly, what about Jesus' faith? How can he demonstrate his faith to the people to whom he is going to minister? How about a spectacular miracle, here highlighted in the idea of Jesus throwing himself down from the pinnacle of the temple? Yes, this could be a wonderful way of drawing attention to his divine authority but at what cost to his humanity? This is not the message of the kingdom of God that he has come to proclaim and this is not his calling. His way is only to be the way of God. His role is to worship and serve, to be the Servant of the Lord.

This way of worship and service is one for us too. We will inevitably meet temptations of many different kinds, but just as Jesus confronted and defeated the devil, so can we in our turn, following his example and trusting in the way of God.

HYMN Singing the Faith 235 (*Timothy Dudley-Smith*)

1, Christ our Redeemer knew temptation's hour
in desert places, silent and apart;
and three times over met the tempter's power
with God's word written, hidden in his heart.

2. He makes not bread what God has made a
stone,
he at whose bidding water turns to wine;
we are not meant to live by bread alone
but as God speaks the word of life divine.

3. He will not ask the fickle crowd's acclaim,
nor flaunt the Sonship which is his by right,
nor seem distrustful of the Father's Name
who bids us walk by faith and not by sight.

4. He seeks no kingdom but by cross and grace,
for love of sinners spurning Satan's throne;
his triumph seen in those he died to save
who, to his glory, worship God alone.

Prayers

Father, what happens to us is a great test of character, and our trials leave us the worse or the better, depending on our we react to them. We thank you for Jesus; he was made perfect through sufferings. Help us, too, to use our trials and sufferings positively, to face difficult situations and to make the best of them.

Father, give us sympathetic understanding now as we pray for those in situations of stress and strain.

We think of those suddenly thrust into a new situation and having to adapt themselves to a new life – young people away from home for the first time, husbands or wives recently widowed, those just retired. Help them to find their bearings again and to discover what changes in themselves you want them to make.

We remember those who feel their lives are spent in a backwater unrecognised and unacknowledged – invalids, children caring for elderly parents, political prisoners. Save all such from stagnation and boredom. Keep them lively and alert, and bring them to see how their faithfulness has its part in your plan.

We think of all those who are under great pressure – the overworked, those with great responsibilities, staff in understaffed hospitals and care homes. Give them the strength they need to see them through and save them from being worn out by their work.

Father, we thank you for all your people in the past who have come through hard experiences and proved their faith. Help us, too, to persevere to the end, and to use our trials positively and creatively to your glory. **Amen.**

The Blessing

As we now rededicate ourselves to God, including what we can offer in terms of time and money to the work of the Church, we do so in the knowledge that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and fellowship in the Holy Spirit, is with us all. **Amen.**

[Prayers taken and adapted from More Contemporary Prayers published by SCM]