

Lectionary readings: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5.12-19; **Matthew 4:1-11**

³⁷ And a voice from heaven said, ‘this is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ ¹ Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³ The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ ⁴ But he answered, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”’ ⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ⁶ ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you,” and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”’ ⁷ Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”’ ⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; ⁹ and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”’ ¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him. [Matt 3:37-4:1-11 NRSV]

Well, as we all know, today is the first Sunday in Lent and I don’t know about you, but it seems to have taken me a bit by surprise this year! Last time I preached here was in Advent and I was describing how, not being Cradle Anglicans, or involved in any type of liturgical worship or observation of church festivals, we had to learn what these festivals are all about. What we learned is that, like Advent, Lent is a penitential season before a major church festival, i.e. Christmas and Easter. However, to an impartial observer, the practices of Advent and Lent seem to be fairly inconsistent, to say the least’. To make sense of it all, I was tempted to conclude that the answer was ‘chocolate’! In Lent, we give up chocolate for a few weeks; in Advent we almost force-feed our children with chocolate which seems to lurk behind every door of an Advent calendar! Nevertheless, Lent is upon us and what new thoughts on this can we glean from today’s readings?

So, what is Lent and what should we, as Christians, be doing about it? Lent is that time in the Church Year when we identify ourselves with Christ’s 40-day fast in the wilderness [Matt 4:2]. This passage, however, clearly comes at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry on earth, not in the build-up to his death and resurrection. So why has Lent (merely the old Anglo-Saxon word for Spring, cf. Dutch *Lente*) come to have this role in the Christian church? The early church (c. 5th century) believed observation of Lent to be a commandment from the Apostles. All churches that have a continuous history extending before AD 1500 observe Lent. Lent has become a season of soul-searching and repentance. It is a season for reflection and taking stock and it has become conventional to give up certain things, or abstaining from some practices, particularly those we enjoy but which are not always good for us. This might involve ‘fasting’, which is a spiritual discipline that does not involve starvation or dehydration. The idea is that, quite often, our bodily appetites control our actions and fasting should make our bodily appetites our servant rather than our master.

Some of you may remember the late Canon Nigel Newton (Newton Stewart) who, some years ago, wrote an excellent article for Lent and I will quote from it: “Throughout the season of Lent, the goal is not to focus on your own sacrifice of giving something up but recognizing that Jesus’ sacrifice for humankind was/is overwhelmingly astounding, giving us salvation, and was/is literally life-changing. Any habit or discipline that makes someone more aware of God’s sovereignty, as well as how much they need God in their day-to-day life is encouraged as a way of celebrating Lent.” Amen to that!

In his article, Nigel quoted from the Reformer John Calvin’s well-known “Institutions” but there are very similar statements in the Roman Catholic church; according to the *Catholic Encyclopaedia* “The real aim of Lent is, above all else, to prepare men for the celebration of the death and Resurrection of Christ...the better the preparation the more effective the celebration will be. One can effectively relive the mystery only with purified mind and heart. The purpose of Lent is to provide that purification by weaning men from sin and selfishness through self-denial and prayer, by creating in them the desire to do God’s will and to make His kingdom come by making it come first of all in their hearts.”

It is, therefore, appropriate for the start of Lent, that the theme running through the Lectionary readings today is that of ‘transgression’. If we had read today’s Psalm, we would have seen that the refrain is: ***I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.*** So, what is ‘transgression’ in this context? According to the dictionary, it’s “a violation of a law, principle, or duty”; in this case, it’s a violation of God’s Law - the standard definition of ‘sin’.

Today's OT reading goes all the way back to the beginning - the Creation story and its aftermath. It describes how sin first came into the world and marred God's glorious Creation. The story of Eve being tempted by the serpent and leading Adam into transgression is well known and we do not need to dwell on it this morning. Nevertheless, it is a very apt reading for today. As noted, in today's Psalm the refrain was all about 'confessing our transgressions'. Then, in Romans 5, we have one of St Paul's greatest expositions on the subject of sin; in the opening verse [v.12], he picks up the Genesis story: ¹² Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned. And he concludes today's lection with the words: ¹⁸ Therefore just as one man's trespass (transgression) led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. ¹⁹ For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. Ultimately, our transgressions and disobedience can be made 'righteous' only by the work of Christ in our lives.

In our Gospel reading this morning, we have the prototype of Lent: v2 says, *He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished*. You should note that the 'forty days and forty nights' was a Hebrew/Aramaic construct, which simply translates as "a long time". Perhaps just as well, since our Lent actually lasts for 46 days - you have to deduct the 6 Sundays! Nevertheless, we can certainly understand why Jesus was "*famished*". Nowadays, people do not normally starve themselves during Lent - but Jesus did.

It is against this background that we have the first of the 3 Temptations. The devil comes to Him and says [v.3]: "*If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.*" This is very interesting: it was not as 'Son of God' that Jesus needed the bread to assuage his hunger; we need to remember that he was in the 'wilderness' as a human being - as Son of God he did not need this experience, and He could have left there at will. But in Matthew's account, it was right at the end of the preceding chapter [3:17] that Jesus had been declared 'Son of God' at His baptism and He then goes directly "*into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil*" [v1]; but He has to go there simply as a man. Jesus's hunger must have been very real, but He recognises the taunt; perhaps surprisingly to us, He uses Scripture to deflect Satan's barbs [v.4]: "*It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."*" So, the physical temptation of hunger is met by the Word of God. Using the Bible, as John Stott used to say: as 'the living word of the living God'.

For the second temptation [vv.5,6], Satan (who again starts: *if you are Son of God*) also uses Scripture; first he 'places' Jesus on top of the Temple in Jerusalem and asks Him to jump, because God "*will command his angels concerning you,*" and "*on their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.*" However, Jesus is wise to this and again refutes Satan from the Scripture [v.7]: "*Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."*" So, the mental temptation of testing God is also met by the Word of God.

For the third temptation: "*the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.'*" [vv.8,9]. Now, as we know, these things were not in Satan's gift and when Jesus' work on earth was completed, He would be given these things anyway. Nevertheless, once more Jesus answers Satan from Deuteronomy (Israel in the Wilderness) [v.10]: "*Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."*" Here, we have spiritual temptation also being met by the Word of God.

Another interesting parallel which emerges from this passage is between Jesus' three temptations and those of Eve and Adam in the Garden of Eden (our OT reading this morning: Gen 3:6: "good for food," "pleasing to the eye," "desirable for gaining wisdom"). Both of these sets of three seem to parallel St John's epitome of human temptation: "the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life" (1 John 2:16, RSV), as we have traditionally read it or "the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride of riches", as the NRSV puts it.

This Lent, rather than starve yourself or endure too many physical privations, why not use this period to immerse yourselves in the Word of God and have your whole being (physical, mental, spiritual; alternatively: body, soul and spirit) nourished and transformed by the Scriptures, so that, like Jesus, you can use these words to refute the enemy? Now that would be an effective weapon! Amen.