



## Revd Ro's Reflection on First Sunday of Lent

### Year A

**Matthew 4.1-11**

**Romans 5.12-19**

Last Wednesday was Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. If I was asked what words come to mind when I think of the holy season of Lent then maybe temptation, sin and repentance would be among the words that spring to mind. At the beginning of the Ash Wednesday Service these words are traditionally read out.

'Brothers and sisters in Christ, since early days Christians have observed with great devotion our Lord's passion and resurrection and prepared for this by a season of penitence and fasting. By carefully keeping these days, Christians take to heart the call to repentance and the assurance of forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel, and so grow in faith and in devotion to our Lord. I invite you therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy word.' I have always thought what an excellent summary this is of what the Lenten season is all about. The passage is worth thinking about throughout Lent. It is also worth keeping in mind as we look at the passage from St. Paul's letter to the Romans set for this Sunday. Lent is a time when we try to sweep everything clean in our lives. It is the time when we specifically come before the Lord in penitence to ask his forgiveness of our sins, to think about the times when we have not done the right things and to say sorry. What follows is our promise to avoid sin and live in Christ's way, to turn from our sins and turn to Christ; that is what repentance is all about.

Our Lord's Prayer says, 'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.' it's a tiny line but contains such a wealth of meaning. We come in penitence and faith to confess our sins and be forgiven. We trust in God's promise of forgiveness for 'all them that truly repent of their sins.' The following bit is vitally important, 'as we forgive those who sin against us.' Now is not the time to go into that, I wonder how many books have been written about it. But it is important to ponder that one and work it out in our lives. There will have been times in our lives when we know that what has

been done to us is wrong. We are never asked to condone wrongdoing, we are told to stand up for what is right. Forgiveness is different and that is required of us.

The prayer continues, 'Lead us not into temptation,' really that could be translated don't let us be tempted and help us when we are. Temptation always comes before sin because we always have a choice. In his poem, 'The Road Not Taken' Robert Frost ends with these words,

'Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

I took the one less travelled by,

And that has made all the difference.'

In a way that sums up temptation and turning our back on it, there are always two or more ways before us. We need to look at them and decide what is right and what is wrong. We are beckoned down various roads, voices call us to do what we want, whatever that may be. I was watching an episode of Agatha Christie's Poirot the other day. At one point the characters are discussing sin and temptation and Poirot, played magnificently by David Suchet says, 'It is a good job we all have a little policeman in our heads to remind us of what is right and what is wrong.' We can replace the 'little policeman' with the teachings of Jesus Christ our God and saviour. We live in the real world and we are human, we all face temptation every day and we all have to make decisions.

Today's reading from Matthew 4 deals with just this. Jesus is fully God and fully human, he feels as we feel and walks the road we walk and so he is tempted as we are. This famous temptation scene appears in all of the synoptic gospels and it comes directly after Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan wilderness. The position of the temptation episode is important, just look at the previous verses.

<sup>16</sup> 'And when Jesus had been baptised, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

<sup>17</sup> And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

(Matthew 3)

Last week on the Sunday before Lent, we looked at the transfiguration of Jesus. There on the mount of the transfiguration Moses and Elijah appear affirming who Jesus is, then there is the cloud, just as on Mount Sinai, and a voice from heaven repeats the words that we have at the baptism, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' Followed by the instruction, 'Listen to him.'

At the moment of his baptism Jesus is affirmed by his heavenly Father, 'You are my Son. You are the Messiah; you are the King of Israel.' Here if you like, is Jesus' triumph, God affirms him and he stands ready for the ministry ahead. Jesus stands in the light of God on his own mountain of understanding and affirmation, we would say on a high. But the darkest hour is always before the dawn and before the dawn of Jesus' ministry he has to tread his own dark hour, the temptation in the wilderness. The very next chapter begins,

<sup>4.1</sup> 'Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup>He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.'

This is no accident; Jesus the Messiah represents Israel. Just as at the exodus the Israelites crossed over The Red Sea, Jesus has risen from the waters of the Jordan. Just as they wandered for forty years in the wilderness, Jesus is in the wilderness for forty days. The Israelites fail again and again, wandering from God's ways and obeying their own desires. Jesus' behaviour is in direct contrast in that he is the perfection of Israel, of humanity. But the temptation in the wilderness references far before this, we can go right back to the beginning of humanity, to Adam and Eve in the garden to their temptation and abject failure. However we view this maybe as an illustration or story, the fact

remains that from the very beginning humans have been tempted to obey their own desires and not what God requires and that has led to sin.

Think about that lovely old hymn, 'Praise to the holiest in the height,' one line refers to Jesus thus, 'A second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came.' Well that sums it up very well and it also sums up our reading from Paul's letter to the Romans as we will see later.

Jesus is alone in the wilderness and he eats nothing for forty days. After that, humanly speaking, he is at his lowest ebb; notice 'he was famished.' His whole being cries out for food. It is now, while he is down after such rigours, that the tempter appears. Often that is the case in our own lives. Satan or the devil is if you like, the embodiment of evil. I've always thought that the fact that the name is almost an anagram of evil is no accident,

<sup>3</sup> 'The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' <sup>4</sup> But he answered, 'It is written,

"One does not live by bread alone,

but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." '

The first attack is at a very fundamental level. Jesus has not eaten and he is ravenous. What is the first need of humanity? Food, so the voice of temptation whispers, 'Command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' The preface to this temptation is the key 'If' is central and contains the challenge 'prove you are the Son of God.' If Jesus is the Messiah he has miraculous powers. Jesus must challenge himself. What sort of Messiah is he to be? The point here is that Jesus is being tempted to use his powers for the wrong reasons, to perform miraculous things to satisfy his own desires, to gain what he wants. Isn't that the root of all temptation, satisfy your own desires, do what you want not what God wants? Is he going to be a Messiah who achieves power by impressing people with miraculous acts, by getting people to follow him because they are struck with wonder at miraculous happenings done to order? The answer is an emphatic no. All Jesus' 'signs' point to God, not himself. Jesus, notice does not get into long conversation or listen to arguments that will try to trap and seduce him into capitulation.

"One does not live by bread alone,

but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." '

Jesus does not act by his own will. He acts by God's will, he is on God's mission. He has been sent by God to save his people and he will walk God's path. There is no easy way for Jesus. Think of the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus is at his lowest ebb. When he begs that this awful cup be taken away yet ends with the words, 'Yet not my will but yours be done.' Obeying God's will, however difficult or dangerous, will be Jesus' guide throughout his life and ministry. We must seek to make it ours too.

Jesus has resisted that personal temptation. Now the devil takes him to the Temple,

<sup>5</sup> 'Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup> saying to him, '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." '

This temptation is different; this is not about satisfying human needs for survival this is about testing God with miraculous acts to win people over. To begin with the devil takes him to the Holy City, Jerusalem the centre of the Jewish faith. Everyone had to make the journey to Jerusalem if it was possible. Even now at the end of the Jewish Seder meal, the Passover meal, the words are shouted,

‘Next year in Jerusalem.’ Not only is Jesus taken to Jerusalem but to the Temple and to the highest pinnacle of it. The Temple is the place of God’s dwelling the Holy of Holies is here. Well then whispers evil, if you are the Messiah, prove it. Show God’s power in God’s house that will win the crowds over! The prophets have said over and over that the true Messiah would enter the Temple and reclaim it as his own. Think of Psalm 24, the Psalm set for the Presentation of Christ in the Temple.’

<sup>7</sup> ‘Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.’

Well says the devil, you are to come into your own house, what better way to prove to people that you are the true Messiah than a spectacular act. Throw yourself off the highest tower; after all there is scriptural reference to it.’ How crafty to use scripture to gain his own evil way. Mind you how often have people misquoted the bible to give credence to wrongdoing! The devil is quoting from Psalm 91. I love this Psalm and use it in the office of compline each evening,

<sup>11</sup> ‘For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.’

<sup>12</sup> On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’

Jesus sees through all of this, his mission and ministry is not about winning people over with spectacular signs to show off his powers. Jesus’ ministry and mission is to bring the good news of God to the people, they must choose to follow him because of his teaching, they must turn to God of their own volition, and that way will be costly. They must ‘take up their cross daily’ and follow him. The reward will be won on Calvary through the grace of God but that is far in the future; Jesus stands on the cusp of his ministry.

Maybe the final temptation is the toughest and it is one which floors humanity again and again. It is all about power and control. How much misery and trouble in the world is caused by the abuse of power both nationally, internationally and closer to home in families and at work? People, given a little power, often want more. How often have we heard the words, ‘Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely?’ The novel ‘Lord of the Flies’ deals with just this topic and the results of this thirst for control are terrifying. Shakespeare puts it thus in Measure for Measure.

‘But man, proud man,  
Dress’t in a little brief authority,  
Most ignorant of what he’s most assur’d;  
His glassy essence, like an angry ape,  
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven,  
As make the angels weep.’

We have only to look back over history and at what is going on now to see it on a global scale. Sadly this abuse of power is found much nearer to home. We have to search our own hearts and turn our back on the devil’s temptation to indulge in it.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; <sup>9</sup> and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.

Here we have it then, all the wily pretence has been dropped, it is a straight thrust. Turn to evil, worship me, and I will give you all the power in the world, look around from this mountain, all this could be yours. Riches, power, control, you are the Messiah so what kind of Messiah are you going to be? All you have to do is turn to evil.



Jesus' angry reply is just like his rebuke to Peter,

<sup>10</sup> 'Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written,  
"Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him." '

Jesus turns his back on the devil and turns to his heavenly Father. His ministry is not about power. It is a ridiculous argument anyway. Jesus is King of the Cosmos, the co-creator of all that is; he is part of the Godhead. All power in heaven and earth is given to him already by God. But the power as we understand it is turned on its head by Jesus. 'This is our God, the servant King.' Jesus says this to his disciples who are quarrelling about status,

<sup>43</sup> 'But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup> and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup> For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.' (Mark 10)

Jesus sums up his service in the foot washing at the Last Supper,

<sup>12</sup> 'After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? <sup>13</sup> You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. <sup>14</sup> So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup> For I have set you an example that you also should do as I have done to you. <sup>16</sup> Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.' (John 13)

This is the way of Jesus Christ, 'hands that flung stars into space to cruel nails surrendered.' Jesus is Lord of all but his way is humility and service and it must be ours, status, desire for power and control of others has no place in Christianity.

So Jesus has answered all the temptations, unlike Adam, unlike the Israelites he has triumphed and now he is ready for his ministry.

<sup>11</sup> 'Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.'

it is now the angels come to him, it is now he turns to walk with his Father the path that was planned from the beginning, it is now he turns in love to give his own life to save all humanity.

To understand our epistle reading we have to hold in mind that Jesus, fully human and divine, came in love to set humanity free, that is what links these readings together. 'A second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came.' I think anyone would be forgiven for saying that this is a very difficult reading. To take it in at a sitting, particularly when sitting in church and hearing it read just once would be very difficult. It deserves study and thought. Of course it does, Paul is putting over a very carefully crafted argument in this epistle and we have to follow it carefully. What follows are only my thoughts. Once again it begins with that word. 'Therefore' and that always links us back to what has gone before, this is the previous paragraph,

<sup>10</sup> 'For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. <sup>11</sup> But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.' Jesus is the second person of the trinity; he came in love, God's love to save lost humanity. It follows that God is on the cross suffering for the entire world. It is the most wonderful gift of our loving Father, and so Paul explores this more fully.

<sup>12</sup> '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—'

When God created the world it was perfect, he made humanity in his image, but because humanity is in a relationship of love, humanity had free will. The picture of Adam and Eve is simply an illustration of this truth, humanity chose to turn from God and follow their own devices. Sin like any disease became rife and death and decay followed on from that. At that point there was no law; God gave the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. It was in a way the yardstick of right behaviour. It was given to guide the people into the way of God.

<sup>13</sup> sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. <sup>14</sup>Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.'

God had made a covenant with Abraham and Moses. He always loved his people and did not turn away from them. Even when God led them from captivity in Egypt and brought them out of slavery through the Red Sea the Israelites continued to stray from the path and do their own thing. Sin was very present but again and again God called them back to him. From Moses onwards they had the Law given by God to guide them, this should have led them on the straight path but still they sinned and rebelled. Always though, there was the promise of God, his Messiah, the chosen and anointed one would come to the people and save them.

<sup>15</sup> 'But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many.'

Humanity was in sin and the relationship with God was broken, people had turned their back on God to go their own way. But for those who loved God, who tried to live with the law of God as a guide, who attuned their lives to him there was the wonderful promise of the coming of the redeemer.

Think of Simeon and Anna,

<sup>25</sup> 'Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. <sup>26</sup> It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.' (Luke 2)

Jesus came and stood with humans, God incarnate, God had come to human beings to rescue them in love. Only through Jesus could the relationship broken by sin be restored. But it was up to each individual to turn to him and follow him.

<sup>16</sup> 'And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgement following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification.

<sup>17</sup> If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.'

Jesus is at the centre of everything. God gave his gifts to humanity through free grace and love, we haven't earned them. It was Jesus who acted in obedience to his Father and won pardon and salvation for all who truly turned to him in faith. He 'opened wide his arms for us on the cross, he put an end to death by dying for us: and revealed the resurrection by rising to new life' (Eucharistic prayer B Holy Communion Service.)

Jesus' obedience to his Father's will is central, think of his words in Gethsemane and think of Philippians 2,

<sup>8</sup> 'he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.’

<sup>18</sup> ‘Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. <sup>19</sup>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.’ Jesus died on the cross and won salvation for us, he restored the relationship between God and humanity and through his triumph over death we are assured of a place with him, ‘Death has no more dominion.’ We will be united in Christ, but that is not the end we wait in hope for the coming of Jesus to rule over God’s perfected order.

We have only to look around us to see that sin is rife, that people continue to cause suffering on a colossal scale. But we have the promise of God that all will be changed and all who follow him, all who live lives according to the teaching of Jesus their saviour will have a place in that newly perfected order. It is part of our daily prayer,

‘Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’

This is the promise of God that Paul speaks of when he writes.

<sup>21</sup> ‘grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.’

Jesus is our Lord and King, during this period of Lent we try to attune our lives to his way. We look towards the cross and fix our eyes on the love and obedience of Jesus Christ. A love so strong it took him to Calvary for us. He died for us and won the battle against the evil of the cross. On Easter morning Jesus rose from the dead and conquered death forever. We have his promise of eternal life with him.

*‘Love’s redeeming work is done, fought the fight the battle won:’* Charles Wesley

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