

2023-02-26 ... 10am Worship Sermon ... Revd Jane Stephenson

Genesis 2: 15-17; 3:1-7; Romans 5: 12-19; Matthew 4: 1-11

'The Temptations Lent 1'

The local sheriff was looking for a deputy, and one of the applicants - who was not known to be the brightest academically, was called in for an interview. **"Okay,"** began the sheriff, **"What is 1 and 1?"** **"Eleven,"** came the reply. The sheriff thought to himself: **"That's not what I meant, but he's right."** Then the sheriff asked: **"What two days of the week start with the letter 'T'?"** "Today & tomorrow." Replied the applicant. The sheriff was again surprised over the answer, one that he had never thought of himself. **"Now, listen carefully. Who killed Abraham Lincoln?"**, asked the sheriff. The job seeker seemed a little surprised, then thought really hard for a minute and finally admitted: **"I don't know."** The sheriff replied: **"Well, why don't you go home and work on that one for a while?"** The applicant left and wandered over to his pals who were waiting to hear the results of the interview. He greeted them with a cheery smile: **"The job is mine! The interview went great! First day on the job and I'm already working on a murder case!"** [www.jokes](http://www.jokes.com) of the day

It is often tempting to consider ourselves more knowledgeable than we really are, or on the other hand to misunderstand the abilities of those around us. It depends to some extent on how we listen to the voices we hear around us, on the words we hear spoken. If that had really been the deputy's first job, it wasn't going to go well was it?

In today's Gospel reading from Matthew, it is also (in some ways), Jesus' first day on the job. He has already been blessed and reassured during his baptism in the Jordan, by the Words coming from his Father in heaven: "This **is** my Son. My beloved. I am delighted in him." Statements of positive affirmation, but he has to be certain that he has fully understood the meaning of the words he has just heard and so it is from here that Jesus, as his "first job," retreats into the wilderness to reflect on the task that is to be done. It is in the wilderness that he now hears other words around him, that are tempting him away from the path that he wishes to follow. The words spoken by Satan are not definitive, they **are** temptations: you **could** do this, you **could** If you **wanted to**.... If you **were to use** the power you have been given It is here that his vocation as God's Son is questioned and challenged by the devil. It is here that Jesus himself must make the choice to follow or refuse the temptations and thus enable humanity to be reconciled to God, or to remain forever alienated.

The readings for this Sunday, the start of Lent come together to remind us of how much God offers to us, how he offers us life itself and how, in the story of Adam we turn away from that gift, preferring to hear other voices. We respond to seductive temptation, which gives us the knowledge of good **and** evil and in doing so allows fear and distress to enter the world, obscuring a knowledge of eternal love. These human characteristics live within us and whilst some will resist the full power of their hold, others will use fear to pursue their own purposes and their own need for power and control over the world. This may be most evident in the history of wars and dictatorships hardly historical if we look at the global turmoil **PTO**

we still face today, but it is also evident in all our lives, in the times when the voices we hear mean that we do things for ourselves rather more than we do them for others.

Let's remind ourselves of the temptations Jesus experiences. The questions he is set are rather more tricky than those of the would-be deputy, but there are three of them:

1. Turning stone into Bread – Satan says to Jesus: use the power of your baptism to feed yourself, to turn this stone into food, with which you can then wield power. People will follow you if you feed them. Control the food source. Don't we still do this? Global food sources are controlled by richer nations, by those with the military force, or the political and economic power to decide who eats and who does not. Look at the recent earthquakes in Turkey and Syria and the failure of many politicians to authorise swift aid to those considered opponents of their regimes. Food and aid are conditionally offered if you follow the right rules.
2. Similarly Jesus is tempted to display the power he knows he has been given, by jumping from the temple onto the stones below. The "visible magic" of his rescue by the angels will draw all people to him. There will be no need to walk gently, or carefully because the power displayed on this scale will make everyone worship him. The worship would be worship induced by the drama of the rescue, and by the fear of what such a powerful being could do, if he chose to. There is no love in this spectacle. It is much more akin to an invitation to head a global protection racket. Again sadly, we can find many parallels in international dealings.
3. Finally, the Devil calls on Jesus to change his allegiance. God is the wrong master, but with the devil Jesus can immediately conquer the world laid out beneath him. What is it however that he should seek to conquer? Is it the possession of land? Is it worshippers who out of fear will bow to him. Jesus would have to allow that his knowledge of the **good** would be used as a source of intelligence so that the **evil** could overcome it. Jesus himself, though powerful in worldly terms, would become subservient to the devil.

All these temptations provide shortcuts to power, but not to an end that is the intention of God. Jesus therefore has to decide which voice he is obeying. Should he use the powers he has simply for his own needs, or should he trust in the voice from Heaven that offers him divine grace, which he carries into the world? Should he enjoy a shortcut to earthly power, or does he take the vocational route of service to God? Is it the devil he worships and the route of sin that should prevail, or is it only through obedience to God that he can rescue and redeem a fallen world? We know the answer, because Jesus firmly repels the devil, removes the tempting words from his head and comes down from the mountain to begin his true work amongst God's people.

This true work is for us the hope of Lent. Lent is a time for reflection and preparation; a time to recognise and repent of the sin that draws us magnetically to the shortcuts of human power. It is a time of an opportunity to find once more the grace of God that offers us empowerment of a very different (**next page**)

kind. In the world around us Lent comes with hopeful signs. Where we live, we are fortunate to be reminded by nature itself of that hope: the lengthening of the days, the early Spring flowers emerging; the buds appearing. There is still the whisper of winter, but there is also the distant breath of summer.

The good news is not only for Easter Day, but it is part of this time of preparation too. We can rejoice and be glad that **“the universal occurrence of sin is matched and overcome by the super-universality of grace.”** *Bruegemann et al.* God’s grace entered the world through the birth of Christ and it is sustained through his acceptance of his vocation and his refusal to turn the world towards darkness.

May we prepare ourselves in Lent to accept this grace through our prayer, our worship, and our actions, and may we give ourselves the time and space to hear God’s Word above the shouting temptations and denials of the world. If this is our first day on the job, may it be filled with hope and with understanding that it is the first day of our true vocation. Amen