

Temptation

5 3 17

Almighty God,
whose Son Jesus Christ fasted for forty days in the wilderness
and was tempted as we are, yet without sin:
give us grace to discipline ourselves
in obedience to your Spirit;
and, as you know our weakness,
so may we know your power to save.

Our text, this morning, may be found in the Authorised Version of the Bible and is Matthew chapter 6 and verse 13:

'And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil'

It's good to be back and it's kind of Father Stefan to invite me to preach. Being here at St Mary's is like coming home, it's like being with family. And today, the First Sunday in Lent, where better to start our Lenten discipline than with the word 'temptation' ? The prayer that Jesus taught us reminds us that temptation is a fact of life and could, I guess, even be a daily fact of life with an ever-present possibility of being led astray, enticed in the wrong direction. So, this morning, let's look at Jesus' own experience of being tempted in the wilderness.

John's gospel does not mention the time Jesus spent in the wilderness after his baptism and before the start of his public ministry. Mark's gospel, succinct as

ever, summarises what happened in just two verses, stating the facts: Spirit led, Jesus spent 40 days among wild beasts in the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan and thereafter ministered to by angels (Mark 1 v12/13). Matthew and Luke have parallel accounts, though Luke reverses the order of the second and third temptations.

So what are the temptations ? Well each one has the word 'if' and each one is designed to deflect Jesus from what it truly means for him to be the Messiah.

The first challenge – to turn stones into bread – is to use his God-given powers selfishly: to satisfy his own individual hunger. Well, certainly, in the feeding of the five thousand, then in the feeding of the four thousand, Jesus does feed the hungry, making a little bread go an awfully long way. And, at the Last Supper, the unleavened bread of a Passover meal becomes a symbol of the bread, his broken body which will spiritually feed us as Christians down the ages. But here, Jesus declines to do as Satan challenges him to do.

The second takes place on top of the Temple in Jerusalem – to jump off the pinnacle of the Temple and, instead of falling to his death, to be uplifted by the angels who have care of him. Certainly, the crowd thronging the Temple would be amazed by such a miracle but again it would be a misuse of his power simply to show off: There are, of course, many miracles: for example the stilling of the storm at sea; the blind see; the deaf hear; the lame walk; the leper cleansed; and Lazarus, a beloved friend, raised from the dead but each miracle was done with a good in mind that challenged the individual and those who witness the miracle to

question who it was who could so effectively channel God's power. So again, Jesus refuses to do so citing scripture to show why it would be wrong to do so.

The third on a high mountain is Satan's offer to make him ruler the world provided Jesus were to worship him. Jesus, the Son of God, is ultimately Christ our king. But before Jesus comes again in glory to judge the world, his throne will be the cross and his crown a crown of thorns. Jesus' kingship depends on his obedience to his Father's will, not on doing something dodgy in order to get power.

In each case, Jesus cites scripture to show why what Satan is inviting him to do, tempting him to do, enticing him to do, would be so wrong to do. And that is precisely the real essence of temptation: to try to deflect us from being the people we could truly be, that God wants us to be: his true sons and daughters, serving him by how we serve others.

So let me end this morning simply by restating the prayer which is our text today:

'Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil'

We all have the possibility of being tempted, of being deflected from the path that will take us home to God our Father. But may we have the grace and the understanding not to fall into a trap which will make us less than people God intends us to be.

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Mary the Virgin and All Saints, Potters Bar

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G: Sermons 35 :Temptation

