**Morning Praise @ Home 26th February 2023**

**Opening prayer**

Blessed are you, God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you have blessed us with every spiritual blessing; enable us by your power to be true to our calling and live holy and blameless lives before you all our days, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. **Amen**

**Confession** Let us admit to God the sin which always confronts us.

**Lord God, we have sinned against you; we have done evil in your sight. We are sorry and**

**repent.** **Have mercy on us according to your love. Wash away our wrongdoing and cleanse us**

**from our sin.** **Renew a right spirit within us** **and restore us to the joy of your salvation,** **through**

**Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen** cf Psalm 51

**Absolution** May the Father of all mercies cleanse us from our sins, and restore us in his image

to the praise and glory of his name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

**Bible Readings** **Genesis 2:17 – 19, Genesis 3:1 – 7 Matthew 4:1 – 11**

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**Reflection from Sue Coyne**

**Temptations in the desert**

**1. READY FOR THE ROAD?**

I’m guessing most of us have undertaken a driving test at some time. It’s a lot more complex now than it used to be! Those who want to use Britain’s road network need 1st to commit the Highway Code to memory. Only when they have proved that they are familiar with that set of rules are they then given the practical test – because there’s no credit in just *knowing* what the guidance is, unless you actually know how to *apply* it in real life situations.

Everyone is required to pass **both** sections of the test – knowing the rules and living them out - to ensure that they are ‘ready for the road’, ready for the snarl-ups on the M56 and the narrow lane zoomers to Burton.

Today’s narrative from Matthew comes just *after* Jesus’ baptism, and just *before* he starts his public ministry. It is God’s way of ensuring that Jesus is ready for the road ahead, a road that will be challenging. 1st, he spends 40 days in isolation, in a wild and difficult terrain, echoing of the Jews’ 40-year wander after being miraculously rescued from Egyptian oppression. Deuteronomy ch 8 (a well-known passage which Jesus later quotes from) describes how God led his people: ‘all the way in the wilderness [for] forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands.’ Will Jesus pass the test now?

Some may question whether God is mean to put His Son through this, just as they may wonder whether God’s *withholding* His blessing when they personally face testing times. In fact, we need to see times of trial as a helpful way of developing our resilience, strengthening our dependence on God when what our circumstances offer us falls short. Of course, it won’t feel like a blessing at the time!

**2. SATAN’S AIM**

Matthew takes seriously that there is an enemy to God, a power hostile to His loving purposes, who is seeking always to overturn them and damage our faith.

* Ever since the first humans were prompted by Satan to follow their own desires, rather than God’s guidance, humanity’s relationship with God has been disrupted.
* The Bible recognises that each one of us now has rebellious impulses *within* us, as well as also being tempted externally.
* Jesus himself warned his followers that they would be under attack, speaking from his own experience.
* And He *in particular* was in the firing line. After all, if the devil could waylay the Messiah at the outset, the whole salvation plan would crumble!

So the temptations Jesus faced were very real and he had to navigate through them carefully.

1stly, probably cold and weak from hunger, aching from dehydration, the idea of taking things into his own hands and turning stones into bread in v.3 must have seemed overwhelmingly appealing. After all, hadn’t God just affirmed at his baptism that he was his much-loved Son – surely starvation wasn’t part of the deal! Today’s culture would agree – we ought to satisfy our physical desires ‘because we’re worth it’. Adam and Eve in our 1st reading were seduced by fruit that was ‘good for food and pleasing to the eye’.

Jesus had to keep trusting that, rather than a quick fix of his bodily wants, relying on the creative, energising and sustaining power of His Father, expressed in the Hebrew scriptures, was His true source of life and well-being. Unlike so many corrupt national leaders today, Jesus’ forthcoming ministry would not be about satisfying his own desires.

2. But wouldn’t it be good to start that ministry with a media splash? suggests the king of twist next in v.5-6. The drop from the top of the Temple into the Kidron valley was 450 feet, but, astounding the masses, the humble carpenter could emerge unscathed! The crowds would come flocking to God’s Son!

Deviously, the tempter backs it up with a quote from Ps 91. Doesn’t Jesus trust God’s word that he’ll be saved?

The king of twist is making two subtle attacks here: getting Jesus to question God’s motives – wouldn’t it be helpful to *test* whether the Son is really precious to His Father? – as well as trying to coerce the Father into following His Son’s dictates.

But Jesus chooses the alternative – to stay humbly obedient, rather than presuming about his status, trusting that He is loved without asking for proof.

3rdly, Adam and Eve were tempted by the offer of power – the fruit was ‘desirable for gaining wisdom’ and ‘becoming like God’ – just one quick bite, suggests the serpent… A similar offer comes Christ’s way – *all* the power he could want, *every* land he can see, all coming under the Son’s reign, *so easily* granted! Just let’s slide rather quickly over the small print Terms and Conditions in v.9, that Jesus would need to honour Satan first…

In recent years there has been a huge audience for the *Line of Duty* series, and currently for *The Gold*, about pursuing the Brinks Matt thieves. Both feature those who are *meant* to be upholding the honour of the law, but who have previously bowed the knee to the Freemasons or the bosses of Organised Crime Groups – yet the heroes are those who have resisted that path to influence, who cannot be blackmailed because they have stayed true to their calling. In fact our culture longs for integrity, and Jesus exemplifies it here, in v.10 rejecting an easy path to power, for the costly Lordship that came via the Cross.

**3. JESUS’ ACHIEVEMENT**

By being able to resist the enemy’s persuasive diversions from God’s right path, Jesus overturns the first humans’ original failure.

* By representing us in resisting rebellion, he saves us, triumphing where Adam & Eve failed.
* And when he subsequently died on the Cross, taking on – and cleansing us from – *our* sin, he finally broke Satan’s control, enabling our previously disrupted relationship with Holy God to be restored.

All Satan’s attacks Jesus faced down out of love for us.

* He knew that only if he fulfilled *his* calling, could we have a hope-filled future, reconciled to Father God.
* It is because he *stayed* close to God that we can even *get* close to God.

**4. US TOO?**

All very well, you might think, but Jesus *was* divine as well as human, it probably wasn’t as hard for him.

Yet in the wilderness we see Jesus operating entirely within his human limitations. Hebrews 4 emphasises that Jesus was tempted in every way, **just as we are** – yet he did not sin. Each time he defeated the enemy, it wasn’t with supernatural power, but simply by trusting and knowing his Bible - ‘It is written…’ he says three times. The Word of God is **a *spiritual weapon that every one of us can use.*** We need to be familiar with God’s Highway Code for life.

Today, believers don’t just have God’s written word but also Jesus’ Holy Spirit to help us resist the twister. We are no longer *bound* to succumb to temptation – Jesus shows us we have a choice. His Spirit guides us in how to succeed, instead of fail; how to hold fast in trust, instead of doubting; how to stick close to God’s path, instead of being diverted from it.

**5. NOT AN EASY PATH**

That doesn’t mean that serving God suddenly becomes easy. When Jesus rejected Satan’s enticements he chose an alternative that was difficult:

* Humble submission to God’s purposes, instead of choosing his own way
* Obscurity and criticism, instead of being the warrior Messiah people were looking for
* Self-abasement and poverty, instead of worldly status
* Willed powerlessness in the face of aggression.

It was a hard road to eventual glory.

The road for His followers may not be easy either. God has a costly, but wonderfully glorious, vocation for each one of us … one that we can be sure that the enemy will do everything possible to distract us from.

Some of Satan’s work is being done for him by today’s instant gratification culture … so believers are called to navigate its currents carefully:

* Instead of grabbing at ‘fulfilment now’, Christians are called to play God’s long game, which might involve setting light to what others indulge in
* We are not to invest our lives in obtaining ‘status,’ or ‘stuff’ that we can’t take with us when we die, but instead invest in the people and causes of God’s Kingdom
* We need to avoid any compromises with the king of twist, however appealing the offer – the Terms and Conditions are never worth it.

Instead we are called to be an example to all who know us, depending on God’s power to help us shine a steady beam of Christ’s light into places of shadow and hopelessness, places where people don’t yet know that there is a rescuer who loves them and has the power to set them free.

**6. LET’S START**

How can we turn these ideals into action during Lent and shine more effectively? Because, the more we forge the kind of dependent links with God that Jesus demonstrated, the more secure we are to withstand outward temptations and inward desires.

* For the next 40 days, one of my colleagues is ‘fasting’ from watching the midday news, so that he can dedicate that time to praying. Think – is there anything that we can take *from* our daily routine so that God gets *more* of our attention?
* Many of us may already read a Bible passage each day, but if that’s not yet a habit, how about going through Matthew’s Gospel from start to finish, reading just 30 verses every morning except Sundays, over a tea or coffee break, so that, when passages are subsequently covered in sermons (as it is this year’s lectionary Gospel), it will re-enforce what you have already encountered, and you will recognise that ‘It is written…’? Using the *Dust & Glory* reflections each day can also help create a Bible habit.
* We might try asking God to help us identify those inner and outer voices that personally lure us back into the darkness: let’s name them to ourselves, say sorry to God, write them on paper then burn them if that helps, and then pray for His strength to ignore them.
* Above all, never accept the idea that we can receive a good thing by committing a bad act. It’s the enemy’s trap – and, in today’s passage, Jesus has shown us how to be set free from his snares. **AMEN**

**Affirmation of faith**

Do you believe and trust in God the Father, source of all being and life, the one for whom we exist?

**We believe and trust in him.**

Do you believe and trust in God the Son, who took our human nature, died for us and rose again?

**We believe and trust in him.**

Do you believe and trust in God the Holy Spirit, who gives life to the people of God and makes Christ known in the world?

**We believe and trust in him. This is the faith of the Church.**

**This is our faith. We believe and trust in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

**Prayers of intercession led by Tony Carter**

Lord God, on this first Sunday in Lent, we remember the trials and temptations of your son Jesus Christ in his journey through the wilderness, and how he triumphed over all. In our prayers we think of the difficult journeys in life encountered by so many people in the world. We pray that in their different times of need, they may find discernment to see their way ahead, and strength to overcome whatever problems they face. We pray that faith may be deepened in this period of Lent, and all may walk in the light of the Lord.

We pray for the Church, of which we are members, and thank you for the light it provides for our journeys ahead. We pray for those who lead us in our worship, and for all those who enable others to know that light in their lives. We pray for the family of the Church coming to the Lent groups that they may be challenged to know the true meaning of failure and success. Bind us together, Lord, as a family, so that we can travel along life's journey helping and supporting one another, overcoming together all the trials and temptations which confront us daily.

Lord God, we think of the troubled parts of the world where there is so much suffering, where darkness prevails and where the light of the Lord seems so far away.
We pray for people whose humanity is denied by others

* for those without homes and food
* for those suffering from malnutrition, illness and disease
* for those living in fear of war and conflict.

We remember especially the people living in Ukraine, Turkie and Syria; and those in other parts of the world where there is unrest.

We pray for all those working for peace and justice. We ask that they may all be sustained and encouraged in their difficult work. May they know the light of the Lord in everything they do in the name of peace.

Lord God, we thank you for our neighbours, our friends and for the people around us with whom we work and share our daily lives. Today we give thanks for our Bell Ringers – for Jane and Frank and all those who ring our bells on Sundays and special occasions. We thank you for all the joys and blessings of family life. Forgive us when we quarrel and make us always ready to forgive one another.

We pray for those who are old and lonely, those isolated because of ill-health, and those who find it difficult to make friends or be accepted. Show us all what we can do to help, and teach us to be good neighbours.

We thank you, Lord, for your miracles of healing, and we pray for all who administer to the sick and infirm.
We bring before you in a moment of quietness those we know or love who are ill or in special need at this time, and we name them in our hearts.

We pray for all those who mourn and for those who still miss the companionship and care of loved ones.
We pray that as they journey in this part of their life, that the challenges of Lent and the assurances of Easter will bring to them new strength and new purpose.

Lord God our Father, as we go out into the world today we remember that your son was tempted by the forces of evil but chose faithfulness rather than popularity, service instead of fame, sacrifice instead of power. These temptations still come to us, Lord, and we are far weaker and so we pray for the strength to shun them as he did so that we may be of use to God and to man.

Merciful Father, **accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen**

**The Lord’s Prayer** As our Saviour taught us, so we pray

***Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name, Thy kingdom come,******Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen***

**Closing prayer**

God give you grace to become the people He has called you to be, that you may live and work to his praise and glory, and the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us and remain with us always. **Amen**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. **In the name of Christ. Amen**