



**Sermon preached by Revd David Tatem on 9<sup>th</sup> March 2025**

**Readings: Deuteronomy 26:1-3, 9-11; Romans 10: 8b-13; Luke 4:1-13**

Earlier on, in our Sharing Together spot, we shifted from the more usual focus on giving something up in Lent to take a more positive approach to adopting something, perhaps as a new thing, as an expression of our Christian discipleship. Hopefully not just something for the 40 days of Lent, but something that will embed itself and become permanent, a part of who we are and how we view and live in the world, and something that we hope might make a difference, no matter how small.

It's interesting then, isn't it, that our gospel reading from Luke actually records Jesus saying 'no' to possibilities that are laid out before him; three negatives if you like, which should of course, make us stop and think. He wasn't actually giving anything up, except in a pre-emptive sense, but he was refusing to take certain directions.

It's always a good idea to look at the passages and verses around the ones that we are focused on by the lectionary Sunday by Sunday, because that can be illuminating. It can set it more helpfully in context, and that passage from Luke actually encourages us to do that by the way it begins. Jesus, having been baptised by John and filled with the Holy Spirit, comes up out of the Jordan and immediately goes off into the desert for forty days and nights and ends up with the three temptations we are told about.

And, we have this reading here at the start of our forty day journey towards Good Friday and Easter Sunday during which time we should, if we are well disciplined, follow Jesus' journey more closely than we might the rest of the year. It's the journey through many different encounters with situations and people, with those who are touched by him who will follow him, and with those who will come to oppose him and seek his death. And we should include those who encounter him, shrug their shoulders and walk away.

But let's stop and think for a moment about Jesus' personal experience, let's try, at least try to put ourselves in his position.

In verse 21 of chapter 3 of Luke, when Jesus is baptised, we are told the heavens open, the Spirit descends on Jesus in the form of a dove and he hears the very voice of God. 'You are my son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased.' The beginning of the passage we heard refers to Jesus being full of the Holy Spirit ... Well, if that was us, imagine how we might feel! Talk about a messiah complex, we can do anything! The power we have, at our fingertips, nothing is impossible, nothing and no-one can stand in our way! Whatever we want ... And that's where the problem starts and where the temptations begin ... whatever we/I want ...

So, Luke tells us of the three temptations and it seems to me that there's one temptation not mentioned; and that is simply to say, blow this, I know where this is going to lead, I'm going home to set up a nice little carpentry business and keep my head down. But, of course, if you are really driven, that's hardly ever an option and which could be said of the emperor in Rome, so the real issue is about how you are driven, what drives you, and how you respond to that drive; the values not just by which you choose to live but which live instinctively within you.

That first temptation seems such a reasonable one, harmless even, you're really hungry, you'll never be able to do anything useful if you're famished and all you've got to do is wave your hand or say the word ... So why not? What's the problem? The answer is surely something to do with Incarnation, the idea that in Jesus, God enters into and shares human experience 100%, no easy ways out, no back doors, God fully identified with us. So, Jesus' response that people should not

live by bread alone points towards something deeper about what it means to live in God's created order to have internalised the values that God has, values of life and not death.

There's a sequence to these temptations of course, and you can almost hear the build up to this next one. OK, you're obviously committed to what you want to achieve, here's a suggestion of how you can achieve it, you just need to use my methods – look here's the whole world, masses of people who can be played like a musical instrument if you know how to do it. Play on their fears here, and their deep-seated desires there, a bit of lust for power somewhere else, their obsession with national pride, their suspicions, their anxieties, the ease with which they'll follow popular movements without thinking. Get that right and the world's yours for the taking. And Jesus gives his response; 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only'. Which is very different to saying I choose this emperor over that emperor because, as we already know, it's about being aligned with and imbued with the character of God, with how God loves, values and relates to his people and how within the kingdom of God, that Jesus is so utterly committed to, people correspondingly should, and do, value and relate to one another. A kingdom within which there is no place for prejudice or manipulation: to put it simply perhaps, no place for tricks.

And then comes the last temptation, take yourself to the top of the highest most public place at the heart of the community, throw yourself off and show them just how much God loves you, and will protect you; because look, doesn't it just say that in that psalm somewhere? Wow them with the power of God - if you won't cow them into submission, why not wow them into it?!

And Jesus response once again is 'Don't put the Lord your God to the test', don't play with power, this is no game we're playing. This isn't about showmanship and getting a fanbase: this is about the transformation of the human heart and through that, eventually, the world.

No wonder then, that there were inevitably going to be some who figured out what he was doing as his ministry unfolded and the path to Jerusalem became clearer, who didn't like it, and began to ask the question: Who will rid us of this troublesome messiah?

And where I wonder might we apply all of this in understanding and critiquing our modern world. If we were to do an over-lunch exercise in the Gibson hall with some flip charts, I think we might cover a wall with our thoughts by the end of the afternoon, with some comments marked as more urgent than others, and hopefully too, comments about those under-the-radar situations that affect the lives of many, but don't make it into the headlines and affect the lives of our neighbours, wherever and whoever those neighbours may be.

And in some cases, we might also note those situations where Christians are on different sides of a divide, and we might want to suggest that a re-reading of the account of Jesus' temptations might be important because of the past history and contemporary life of the church, and the place that power politics has played in it. But we need to do that re-reading together because if we think that they need to change their views and behaviour, then we can be sure that we also need to; and if the people of God are to be the yeast in the dough that Jesus said his followers were, then speaking, listening, reflecting, praying, arguing and changing ... together ... is not only important, but an unavoidable characteristic of being followers of Jesus' way.

And surely we can also believe that when Jesus called his disciples, and through them called us into discipleship, he did not do that in any sense of desperation against overwhelming odds - remember that he lived in an occupied country under the domination of the Roman Empire. No, he did that with faith that, in what is sometimes called God's Economy, humility and integrity overcomes fear and prejudice, and love transforms hate, so maybe there's an extension of our flip chart exercise, a more positive one that might cover the other wall, with a list of the transformations that are possible and please God. So might the journey through Lent be enriched.

I want to end by sharing a story from the 1980s, before the end of apartheid, when Archbishop Desmond Tutu was invited to visit St Albans by the then Bishop John Taylor. There was a magnificent service of welcome in the cathedral with robed choirs and candle-bearing processions, and Desmond Tutu preached - not a political speech, but a sermon about the church. He began 'It is a wonderful thing to belong to the church of Jesus Christ!', and preached about his experiences of being part of the Body of Christ. He told the story of visiting California and meeting an anchoress, a woman who lived a life of solitude deep in the woods. He asked her what she did and she said 'I live in a small hut in the woods on my own. I get up at two o'clock in the morning and I pray for you.' 'Well', he said with a broad smile, looking around the cathedral, 'there I am being prayed for in the woods of California at two o'clock in the morning. What chance has the South African government got?!

So perhaps we too might hope to say in relation to the challenges of the world, not because we believe God will sort it all out for us but that working with those who see and love the world as God does, God will achieve the end for which the world was brought into being and even after death, resurrection comes.

Will you come and follow me, Jesus asks -- we'll sit for a few moments and hear that question sung to us.

The hymn *Will you come and follow me?* - sung as a solo.