



First Sunday in Lent

Sermon by Revd Margaret Place



Sunday 6 March 2022

READINGS

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11; Psalm 91: 1-2, 9-16; Romans 10: 8b-13; Luke 4: 1-13

Lenten journey with Christ

Welcome to the online congregation of St Michael's.

You are joining us as we begin the Lenten journey with Christ, as he turns his face to Jerusalem, and willingly takes on the cross. Perhaps it is fitting that we begin with the story from the beginning of Jesus' ministry, where he is tempted three times in the wilderness. We usually see it as Jesus, in preparing himself to carry out his messianic ministry and in thinking his way through various approaches and is tempted to do things the "worldly" way. It is often interpreted to reflect the journey of the Israelites through the desert, as they were to reach the Promised Land and live as God's people so that God's presence is known by all. Jesus, being tempted to turn stones into bread reminds us of the Israelites being given manna in the desert to assuage their hunger. Jesus being tempted to bow down to Satan in return for the kingdoms of the world are a parallel of the Israelites making the golden calf and compromising their relationship to God. Jesus being tempted to throw himself from the pinnacle of the Temple and letting the angels catch him is reminiscent of the Israelites testing God at Masaah and Meribah when they had no water. Moses struck the rock in anger and water flowed but Moses lost his place in the Promised Land.

All of this indicates that this episode is a serious event in the life of Jesus, and must be seen as important not only for what it is, but what it means too. I thought, that since we, as the church represents the Body of Christ, and since our Lent Course this year is looking at the church and its relevance in today's world, it might be helpful to see ourselves as facing similar temptations, and to look to Jesus for guidance in spurning the wiles of the devil. Turning stones into bread. In this semi-post pandemic world we are living in, we are faced with two needs. Extreme financial hardship on the part of an overwhelming number of people, and an even more overwhelming is the emotional and mental fallout from two years of stress. So as we look at the suffering, how are we tempted? Not so much as Jesus was, by the desire to buy support with food, but I think we are tempted to avoid the sort of involvement that Jesus would ask. We are generous with our money and other support for various outreach ministries and no doubt, with secular charities too. But to what extent is our giving the equivalent of a bandage and a cup of tea in a first-aid station? Our charitable outreach is very important, make no mistake, but are we part of the voice of God in our society which will change the structures and make it easier to create jobs, to attract investment, and to develop our people so they have the necessary skills for a 21st century world? To quote the liberation theologian, Dom Helder Camara:

"When I feed the poor, they call me a saint, but when I ask why the poor are hungry, they call me a communist. We are good at feeding the poor, but how do we resist the temptation to assuage our consciences with more giving and less thinking."

I also wonder if we are tempted to leave the loneliness and realm of mental suffering to the “experts”, whoever they are. We all have access to the internet and various forms of social media. Do we see that as part of God’s gift to a suffering world, and use it to walk alongside those who make us really uncomfortable? And what about the “different”? Are those of different nationalities, races, sexualities, and socially unacceptable back grounds just as welcome? Or would we rather write Christian things on social media and ignore the real people?

The second temptation, that of worshipping Satan in order to gain the whole world – does that apply to the modern church? In some respects, yes. There is no doubt that, certainly in the western world, the church is declining. People are looking at all sorts and kinds of spirituality, but Christianity has either got a bad reputation from the right-wing bible belt sort of bullying, or we have been so accommodating to society’s values that we have lost our identity. Or perhaps we are so inward-looking that our church “club” with its jargon and its groups are a cosy home which protects us from a world we fear and don’t understand? And are our leaders dedicated disciples who love Jesus so much that they put their vocation ahead of their ambitions and needs? It is very tempting to see a position in the church as adding to our status and power in this particular community, and the clothing we wear when on THAT side of the altar can easily become a sign of our superiority, whether our role is a priestly one or one of lay leadership. What does the mainline church offer that the secular society doesn’t? We want to avoid looking like a bullying fundamentalist, so we play down our Gospel, we invest in modern equipment, and try to become “attractive”. That certainly makes worship and ministry easier, but are we not compromising too much with the world and not trusting God enough with the Gospel so desperately needed by so many? I think one of the most significant things I’ve heard is that in the USA, many millennial girls are offering themselves in religious orders – they are becoming nuns. One of the starting points was, that in 2010 Oprah Winfrey featured a convent in one of her programmes. Now let’s not for one moment take anything from Oprah – she is a very spiritual person with a big heart and enormous social conscience – and she’s very good at her job. But the girls who have investigated and some of whom have adopted the life of a religious, are not lost souls looking for a job. They are Harvard and other graduates and one was a world champion in her particular sport. They are educated, and the world is at their feet. Why would they choose to give it all up? Because a life of service in a convent with no marriage, no possessions – including no pretty clothes, limited social life and no career is more meaningful and more joyous than worldly success. That hasn’t solved the problem of empty religious houses, nor has it stopped the decline in the church, but it is a clear pointer that a secular church is missing the mark. We have fallen into the trap of temptation to admire the secular world without looking at who WE really are and what we can offer.

The third temptation is that of Jesus being told to throw himself off the highest point of the Temple knowing that the angels would rescue him. Now we all love a good miracle, and most church people have known of one or other kind of miracle. God is good and prayers do get answered. But the devil here is setting Jesus up to “test” God. What Jesus would be doing here is “proving” that God is God. When Jesus healed people, it was out of love and concern, to improve their lives and make them whole. When he fed the 5000 the miracle of the loaves and fishes happened because the people were hungry and there was no other way of feeding them. There was never an attitude of “I’ll show you how great I am and how much God will do for me, just watch this.” It was always, compassion for suffering, and healing so that God’s love was seen, and the kingdom of heaven was built. Miracles were, for Jesus as much about teaching as they were fixing what was wrong. So, what does that tell us about the church? I don’t think we test God so much as doubt whether God can actually do things. So much of our prayer life is to some extent, giving God his instructions or our wish list and we expect God to do what we ask. When we don’t get exactly what we want, we say “prayer doesn’t work.” Or we go to the other extreme and rattle off a few prayers and tell ourselves we are “leaving it all to God.” and carry on as if God is going to pick up the tools and do the job for us. And then when crisis happens, we come crying to God with our woes, never considering that listening to what God wants is an essential part of the deal. Our relationship with God is a covenantal

one. We work with God. We don't work over God, where he does as we ask. Nor do we work under God in the sense that we abandon everything to God like spoilt children who take no responsibility for anything.

Our Old Testament reading tells of that part of the Law where a portion of the first fruits of everything produced must be given to God. That puts us into the right frame of mind. If God comes first and we express our gratitude to God, we then approach everything from the right angle. We see Jesus doing this in his temptations. His replies are always from scripture, stating what God expects. Paul reminds us that those who accept the risen Christ and call on the Lord will be saved. Temptations, especially those within the church, are aimed at separating us from God, and they try to take us down the path of self-indulgence, wasted resources, and a Kingdom of heaven that, if it comes into being at all, will be on very shaky foundations. Let us then, this Lent take on those disciplines which allow us to look at ourselves as Christians, let us ask God to save us from those things that are destroying the body of Christ, and let us once again look at the wonderful Gospel which we actually have. The love and sacrifice of God made man, which was given because we are so deeply loved – even with all our faults and inadequacies - is ongoing. Jesus came to save the world. Let's keep that in mind all the time.