

Sermon for Holy Trinity on Sunday 22 February 2026 at 9h The First Sunday in Lent

Texts: Genesis 2.15-17, 3.1-7; Romans 5.12-19; Matthew 4.1-11

The Temptations of Jesus

St Paul was quite a psychologist as revealed when he wrote these words in his letter to the Romans:

'I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want but the very thing I hate' (Romans 7.15)

For in these words, St Paul expresses so clearly the frustration and indeed grief we all experience between sensing what we know we should do if we are to be our finest selves and the grim reality of what we do in practice. It leaves us feeling trapped and spiritually diminished.

It timely and important therefore that today, at the beginning of Lent, we hear and reflect on the temptations of Jesus. For they are a very real help and guide for us. Not, perhaps in the way that we might expect as a form of 'spiritual self-help guide', i.e. 'Follow these simple steps and you too will be able to master your temptations'! Rather, the temptations of Jesus point us to seek the truth deep within us; to recognise that the truth is our absolute need for God ; and to find, paradoxically, in this truth, that our freedom and dignity as human beings lies.

It seems curious in a way, that immediately after the spiritual high of his baptism when Jesus is acclaimed by God as His own Son his Beloved, that he is immediately called into the wilderness for testing. What is more, St Matthew makes it very clear that it is the Holy Spirit of God who calls Jesus into the wilderness. There is a profound message here that Jesus must undergo this time of testing, of finding what lies within himself, to hear and recognise the voices that call within his heart, within the context of his vocation given to him by God, before he can start his earthly ministry.

We can also imagine that Jesus was also seeking to discern the exact nature of his vocation ; of finding out exactly what God was calling him to do. We are given glimpses in the gospels of his early insights into this – as a twelve year old boy questioning the religious leaders in the Temple and at the wedding in Cana of Galilee where he starts to be aware of a calling and the powers within him yet proclaims to his mother, "My hour has not yet come". But now the moment *has* come with the divine affirmation at his baptism; so he is called for this inner journey of his heart before God.

As Jesus enters the wilderness, the temptations he faces follow those described by the American psychologist Abraham Maslow in his hierarchy of needs: first of comfort, then for power and then for self-fulfilment.

He is aware of his own driving physical needs of hunger and thirst – hence the blandishment to turn the stones which are readily available into bread. He knew he

could do it – hadn't he already turned water into wine at Cana to help the wedding couple – why not do it now to help himself?

He is aware of the scale of the task which lay before him and the longing for things which might make it easier. How much easier it would be not to call men and women to follow him of their own free will, not have to face all the consequences of human weakness, incomprehension and betrayal by power. If he leapt from the Temple and was caught up by God's angels, how much easier would his task be. No one would need persuading after that!

And the final temptation both for power and to leave nothing to chance. Glimpsing all the kingdoms of the world and knowing that all power and control would lie in his hands if he just said "yes" to the tempter's offer, "All these will I give you, if you will fall down and worship me". There could be no possible risk then of not being able to do what he wanted. And, after all, wasn't this the political Messiah his people were expecting? "

Yet Jesus, though tempted, recognises in each of the temptations, that they are a call away from God, the life-giver to worship a lesser god who offers the world yet in reality is leading us to spiritual emptiness and death. Each of Jesus' responses to the tempter, affirm that God and God alone is the one to whom we owe our allegiance and in whom we must put our trust.

For us, the temptations of Jesus and his response to them offer us hope and encouragement but it's important to see where that hope lies. I am very grateful to the theologian and poet Malcolm Guite for his insight that when Jesus was tempted, he was tempted both as a human and as God. For, as Malcolm Guite points out, for us to know that as a human, Jesus was able to resist every temptation, can make us feel terrible when we know that time and time again, despite our best intentions, we fail and fail again. It would be comparing ourselves with a gold medallist in the Winter Olympics and thinking, "If I only tried harder, you too could be like him or her".

But Jesus was also tempted as God as Malcolm Guite explains, entering into the of these temptations, resisting them in faithfulness to his Father, Jesus, "creates and holds a space in which right action is possible, not just for himself but for all of us" (*Word in the Wilderness* p11). Jesus is our Saviour, he takes our place and stands up for us, making up in his act of resistance to evil, what is lacking in us.

Jesus as a human being has entered into the very depths of the temptations, both great and small which we face every day of our lives. He knows how attractive they can be and how easy it is for us to succumb. But he also shows us that by holding fast to God and putting God first in the choices and decisions we made, we can overcome temptation. He also shows us that when we fail, and fail we all will from time to time, that because of what Jesus has done for us in resisting temptation, that the way to mercy, forgiveness and a new start with God is always possible. Whatever we've done or failed to do, God never leaves us mired in the quicksand of our sin, if we honestly desire to be freed of it.

All the temptations which Jesus faced ultimately represented the key temptation which was to avoid following the vocation given to him by God to show us the true

nature of God's love during his ministry and the climax of that love through his death for us on the Cross. For us, the temptations which face daily ultimately are tempting to call us away from loving and trusting God and fulfilling our calling to be the finest people God has created us to be.

So Lent is a time when we are called to walk particularly closely with Jesus, to listen to him and as we do, both to recognise the depths of our weakness and self-deceit in the face of God's call. We are called to look into a spiritual mirror, to recognise honestly how far we are living for ourselves and not for God or to help others and to seek God's help in enabling us change for good.

It's a message which the world needs to hear as well and as we start our own journey of self-examination this Lent with God, we pray that in some way, our turning of heart may also ripple out into the world. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, writing in the *Church Times* recently, spoke of the destructive ways in which we have become blinded and trapped by our worship of power, status and money,

Writing in the context of the relations coming out with the publication of the Jeffrey Epstein files, he asks how we as a society can awaken ourselves from 'the hypnotic trance that allows billionaires to buy people and communities'. He describes 'the fascination of power – not the full-blooded coercive violence but kind of lazy emancipation from all routine constraints – draws the eyes away from the dehumanising processes that sustain it and the ease with which persons as much as things come to look like just another luxury accessory to be brought (or simply grabbed) and hand around.'

The world which the Epstein files reveal may feel light years from our own daily lives, But as the temptations of Jesus show, each time that we reject God in putting ourselves first, whether in our quest for material goods, status or control over others, we are, in our small ways, offering our allegiance to the tempter. This is the one who offers us the world, glittering, compelling, yet whose offer is based on hollowness and lies – who leads us and our society in the way of destruction.

But Jesus, in contrast, shows us the path of hope. For he shows us that if we put God first, in thought, word and deed, we are on the path which leads to life. In him we have the great High Priest who knows and has experienced our every weakness yet has not given way. Rather, he has followed the path to the Cross for us.

The Epstein files have revealed many of the darker aspects of our human nature which can be unleashed when we say "yes" to the tempter to gratify our desires regardless of the cost. But we also have a very different model which shows us of what we are capable when we put God, not ourselves, at the centre of the choices we make.

That model is our new Archbishop of Canterbury. I was moved by her first presidential address which she gave to the recent meeting of the General Synod of the Church of England in London. She promised that her archiepiscopate would be marked by the call to serve others, which had been her first calling. She identified that the theme which has run through all the chapters of her life first as a nurse and

then as a priest, then bishop and later archbishop has been washing feet and serving and caring for others. It's a powerful reminder to us of Jesus' words that "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom of many".

May she inspire us to put God and others first in the choices we make in our lives.

Amen

Canon Daphne Green