

Sermon for Sunday 9 March 2025 at Holy Trinity The First Sunday of Lent

*Texts: Deuteronomy 26.1-11; Romans 10.8-13; Luke 4.1-13*

## **Facing Temptation**

*'Lead us not into temptation  
But deliver us from evil.*

How often do we say these words? Probably daily as we say the Lord's Prayer. But what are we actually saying? Surely not that God would want to lead us to temptation and sin?

The answer is "no". But frequently we are led into temptation and often lead ourselves into temptation through our human nature. We succumb and can feel full of guilt and trapped in our sin. Often we long to break out of this, to lead a life which is holier and more like that of Christ. But time after time, we fail again – it seems as if the old temptations have triumphed and we wonder if we can ever change.

Today we are reflecting on the temptations which Jesus faced in the wilderness at the very start of his ministry. I'm going to suggest these temptations and the way in which Jesus responded to them are a really practical help for us because they provide a guide, a spiritual satnav if you like, to help us navigate the choppy waters of temptations.

But to start, I'd like you to consider two questions. I'm going to give you a little time after each for reflection. You don't need to share your thoughts with anyone. But I hope doing this will help you to start thinking about the reality of facing temptation in your own life and how you currently address it.

The first question is this. Think about a time you knew the right thing to do but didn't do it. Why did this happen?

*Allow a minute or two of silence*

The second question is this. Think of a time when you were tempted to act wrongly but didn't. What helped you to make this good choice?

*Allow a minute or two of silence*

Sometimes we can feel guilty that we are tempted in the first place. But it's important to remember that we are all tempted – whoever we are and however good or bad we may be. It is part of being human and Jesus was no exception. The book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus was tempted like us in every way. Our concern therefore should not be about experiencing temptation. It is about how we respond.

So let's turn now and look at the three temptations which Jesus faced.

The first was to turn the stones of the desert into bread. It's a deeply physical temptation and one we can really understand. I know even after half a day without

food I am very hungry, by the end of the day I can think of nothing but food! What I would be like after some days of fasting I shudder to imagine!

This temptation is partly about Jesus' own physical gratification. How wonderful after the hard, hungry days in the desert to eat bread again! But it's also about use of power – if Jesus had succumbed to this, how tempting it would have then been to repeat this to 'buy' followers - bearing in mind that many in Galilee and Judea at that time would be living at subsistence or below subsistence level. It's the strategy which the Romans used cynically to manage those who were poorest by providing 'Bread and circuses' – in other words, basic food and bloody entertainment so that neither they as rulers nor those they governed faced the real issues of poverty and justice which needed to be addressed.

There is also an environmental aspect to this temptation. That is our temptation to change what are stones and should remain stones into bread and consume it now regardless of the future. Our behaviour, certainly in the West over the past fifty years has been increasingly to turn the 'stones' of our precious resources of minerals, oil and gas to give us those material goods we want now regardless of what impact it will have on future generations.

Then the Devil offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if he will only fall down and worship him. This temptation is about the gift of instant power and control – How easy and how painless it would have made Jesus' ministry. No need to 'do' anything – let the people come straight away under your control. It's a temptation we can recognise in our own lives – the desire to achieve our will through the domination of others. Sometimes our overall aims may be good such as the stated aim to bring about peace. But as we have seen in current American foreign policy, the desire to broker peace, if done selfishly can bring untold harm, and damage in the lives of those you are ostensibly claiming to help.

The final temptation Jesus faced is when the Devil urges him to throw himself off the pinnacle of the Temple so that God can dramatically rescue him by sending squads of angels. You can imagine all the drama, excitement and means of control this would offer. But the temptation to become a spiritual stuntman, would mean that Jesus' ministry would be based on compulsion. By compelling people to believe, Jesus would be stripping away from us the gift of free will given to us by God to chose Him freely.

Jesus rejects each of these temptations. Against the first temptation to turn stones into bread, he tells the Devil, "One does not live by bread alone". In other words- there is more to being human than just gratifying our bodies. We are physical and spiritual beings, made in the image of God. Times of some physically denying ourselves, such as we are now doing in Lent, help us to remind us that we are God's children and He nourishes both our bodies and our souls. It is also in these times when we deny ourselves instant gratification, that we become more aware and helpfully responsive to those in need; showing compassion as we realise what it is like to experience hunger, thirst and lack of comforts which we readily take for granted.

Next Jesus rejects the Devil's temptation to seize political power – pointing instead to the foundational commandment to worship God alone Jesus went on to embody that in every aspect of his ministry – rooted in seeking God's will and serving. "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20.28).

And to the third temptation to throw himself off the pinnacle of the Temple, Jesus replies in the words of Deuteronomy, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test". (Deut. 6.16). We're called by God to have faith in Him and trust Him alone.

Jesus' temptations and how he responded to them help give us a spiritual compass or satnav to guide us when we face temptation. First of all, they remind us that we need to be careful in our daily lives not to be so preoccupied with what we are doing that we don't consciously think about the decisions we take and their implications. It's why this season of Lent is so important because it's a time we pause and reflect about what is actually going on in our lives.

Then I think we can draw from the way Jesus responded, three questions which we can ask when faced with temptation:

1. What is this about? Is it about my gratification or is this for God?
2. What would Jesus have done? Think about his ministry and what characterised it.: Jesus' love of God and following God's will as the foundation of everything he taught and did; loving, forgiving; healing and serving others; and finally offering himself for us on the Cross.
3. Where is my heart in this? Jesus said, in the context of talking about money that we cannot serve two masters God and money. We have to choose. When faced with a temptation to ask ourselves, 'Is this really something of God or am I making an idol of the thing I want, whether it is a physical object such as a new car or fine clothes or power, status, control?

This Lent, let's try and ask ourselves these questions both in the decisions we face and also those we have taken, praying for God's guidance for those areas of our lives where we realise that we need to change.

One aspect that can feel very hard as we deal with our temptations is the fact that Jesus although tempted as we are, was without sin. He did not succumb to temptation. When we are struggling and often fail, it can feel that there is a radical gulf between us and Jesus.

Yet the fact that Jesus did not succumb to temptation actually helps us because it shows us that Jesus, who became fully human as we are, was able to resist evil. It gives us hope, showing us that we can learn to resist evil if we root ourselves, as Jesus did, on God, and ask Him to help us to choose a way of living which honours God, helps others and brings out our true, God-given humanity.

A strong remedy against temptation is thankfulness. When the Israelites finally came to the Promised Land, Moses taught the people that they must offer the first fruits of the harvest and the first born of their animals and offer them to God, as a sign of recognising his Lordship and in gratitude for bringing them from slavery in Egypt to this land of plenty.

Gratitude keeps us grounded – reminds us daily of God's blessing to us, of the support, kindness and help we receive from others. It also helps us keep our eyes on the ball for God's will for our lives – that we are not enslaved to physical objects, money and power but loving, thankful, men and women who glorify God by living selflessly and generously.

Finally God encourages us never lose hope in our struggle against temptation. We know that God loves us, that He understands our weakness and that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10.13). Hold onto those words of the Lord's Prayer to guide us both now and in the future :

*Lead us not into temptation  
But deliver us from evil.*

**Amen**

**The Revd Canon Dr Daphne Green**