

SERMON: Sunday – 6 March 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Overcoming Love - three temptations, three opportunities

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Luke 4:1-13

(I'm grateful to Debie Thomas for her blog 'Journey with Jesus', which provided much of the material for this sermon)

The choices and temptations that Jesus faced were real ones. Jesus clearly had the charisma to draw people to him and he could, had he so chosen, have misused that power to exploit people financially, emotionally, politically or sexually.

People do that sort of thing for their own ends. And before we get too smug, we perhaps a reminder this week of the UK's complicity in the laundering of dirty Russian money. Did we turn a blind eye to involvement in Kensington property transactions or the ownership of Premier League football clubs because it somehow made us all richer?

Has Britain tolerated. Possibly even encouraged, the investment of dirty money from capitalist kleptocrats keen to invest or launder wealth stolen from the Russian people?

Jesus too faced the lure of wealth and status and self centredness.

He could have talked himself into believing that it was really for the good of the Kingdom that his movement should have the financial resources to reach more people and the political clout to make a difference for good.

Perhaps that is what fourth century Christians were thinking when the Edict of Milan (313 AD) ended 250 years of persecution and the Edict of Thessalonica (380 AD) made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. The history of Christendom from then until now can be seen either as a God-given opportunity or as a betrayal of everything that Jesus stood for.

The Lent period of 40 days is, of course, highly symbolic, recalling the 40 years of wilderness wandering for the Jewish people before they were entered the promised land (Exodus 16:38; Numbers 32:13; Deut. 29:5).

Were it to be taken literally, 40 days is well beyond the length of time that a person can survive without water (1-2 weeks) and is approaching the maximum survival time without food (1-2 months). Either way, Jesus was hungry—very hungry—when he was met by his three temptations, each of them offering, in different ways, a quick fix or an easier path than the one he believed God had chosen for him.

Few of us will have experienced real hunger. Fasting has gone out of fashion as a spiritual practice, though in the New Testament it goes hand in hand with prayer.

We will know, however, what it is like to be at our lowest ebb, physically, emotionally and spiritually. Those are the times when our judgement tends to be skewed and we are prone to making poor choices.

It wasn't for nothing that the angel encouraged Elijah to eat and rest before even thinking of resuming his vocation as a prophet (1 Kings 19: 4-8).

It may be worth stopping at this point to ponder what it is that we truly hunger for: love and acceptance? a sense of purpose?

And what substitutes we use: food? drink? sex? money? power? to try to fill the void inside.

The account of Jesus' temptation, included in Matthew, Mark and Luke, not only sets out the nature of Jesus' mission right from the start, it also links the beginning and end of his story, setting out a marker that whatever becomes of this idealistic young man, he is not heading for earthly power and glory.

For struggling Christians of every generation, including our own, this portrayal of his inner spiritual conflict makes it much easier to identify with Jesus, who was "tested in every way as we are yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15).

At his baptism, Jesus hears the bottom-line truth about his identity: he is God's Son, precious and beloved. But when the Spirit leads him into the wilderness, he has to face a series of powerful assaults on that truth. He has to learn how to discern God's presence in a bleak and lonely wasteland. He has to trust that he can be beloved and famished, valued and vulnerable at

the same time. He has to learn that God's care resides within his flesh-and-blood humanity — within a fragile vessel that can crack and shatter. To be beloved is not to transcend the other, grimmer Ash Wednesday truth, that from dust we came and to dust we will return.

The devil offers Jesus three opportunities to walk away from this essential lesson; and we see in this, three invitations to trust God's love in the barren places of our lives.

Because it's one thing to trust God in hindsight, when our hardships are over. It is quite another thing to trust God in the moment, when the comforts and certainties we cling to burn to ash.

The first temptation in the wilderness targets Jesus's hunger. The accuser plays on his hunger. "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." This temptation implies that God's beloved should not hunger. In the devil's economy of self satisfaction, unmet desire is unnecessary, it's not an integral part of what it means to be human.

In inviting Jesus to magically satisfy his own hunger, the devil invites Jesus to deny the reality of the incarnation. To "cheat" his way to satisfaction, instead of waiting, paying attention to his hunger, and leaning into God for its lasting fulfillment.

The devil is encouraging Jesus to disrespect and manipulate creation for his own satisfaction. To turn what is not meant to be eaten — a stone — into an object he can exploit. As if the stone has no natural value, beauty, or goodness, apart from Jesus's ability to possess and consume it.

The devil's economy is one of over consumption in order to satisfy unmet desires. Jesus teaches a different way.

Many people "give up" something for Lent each year. Chocolate, wine, television, Facebook. The goal of these fasts is to sit with our hungers, our wants, our desires — and learn what they have to teach us. What is the hunger beneath the hunger? Can we hunger and still live?

Desire and still flourish?

Lack and still live generously, without exploiting the beauty and abundance all around us?

Who and where is God when we are famished for whatever it is we long for? Friendship, meaning, intimacy? A home, a savings account, a family?

Debie Thomas writes,

I write these words with trepidation, because I know what it is to let hunger gnarl and embitter me. Hunger in and of itself is not a virtue; it's a classroom. To sit patiently with desire — to become its student — and still embrace my identity as God's beloved, is hard. But this is the invitation of Lent. To learn that we can be loved and hungry at the same time. That we can hope and hurt at the same time.

The deprivations of the wilderness teach us that when God nourishes us, the nourishment won't be manipulative and disrespectful. It won't necessitate a violation of God's good creation. The food God gives won't necessarily be the food we'd choose for ourselves, but it will feed us, nevertheless. And through us — if we will learn to share — it will feed the world.

The second temptation targets Jesus's ego. The tempter promises the world in return for compromise. After showing Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world," the devil promises him glory and authority. "It will all be yours," the devil says. Fame. Visibility. Recognition. Clout. A kingdom to end all kingdoms, here and now. The implication is that God's beloved need not labour in obscurity. To be God's child is to bask in glory under the stage lights: visible, applauded, admired, and envied. A God who really loves us will never "abandon" us to a modest life, lived in what the world considers insignificance.

That Christians have an uneasy relationship with power is a laughable understatement. Church history is littered with the ugly fallout of "Christian" ambition, power, fame, and misused authority.

So the question for us is whether we can embrace Jesus's version of significance, a significance made up of humility and surrender.

How important is it to us that we're noticed? Praised? Liked? Is our belief in God's love dependent on a definition of success that doesn't come from God at all? Can we trust that God sees us even when the powers-that-be do

not? Can our lives as God's beloved ones thrive in quiet places? Secret places? Humble and obscure places?

The uncomfortable truth about authentic Christian power is that it resides in weakness. Jesus is indeed exalted, lifted up — but he's lifted up on a cross. His power is the power of self-surrender for the sake of love.

The third temptation targets Jesus's vulnerability. "[God] will command his angels concerning you, to protect you," the devil promises Jesus. "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."

The implication is that if we are beloved of God, then God will keep us safe. Safe from physical and emotional harm, safe from frailty and disease, safe from accidents, safe from death.

It's such an enticing lie, because it targets our deepest fears about what it means to be human in a broken, dangerous world. We want so much to believe that we can leverage our belovedness into an impenetrable shield. That we can get God to guarantee us swift and perfect rescues if we just believe hard enough.

But no. If the cross teaches us anything, it teaches us that God's precious ones still bleed, still ache, still suffer, still die.

We are loved in our vulnerability. Not out of it. We are the children of a God who accompanies us in our suffering, not a God who guarantees us a lifetime of immunity.

So, Why is this good news? It is good news because we are also the children of a God who resurrects. There is no suffering we will ever endure that God will not redeem.

The story of the woman who had four Funerals in one week.

The story of humanity is not a story that ends in despair. It's a story that culminates at an empty tomb, in a kingdom of hope, healing, consolation, and joy.

So there we have it. The First Sunday on the Journey of Lent 2022. And we have Three temptations. And Three invitations. What will we do with them?

In some ways, Jesus's struggle in the wilderness brings the ancient story of human temptation full circle. "Can you be like God?" is the question the snake poses to Adam and Eve in the lushness of the first garden. "Will you dare to know what God knows?"

In the wilderness, the devil offers Jesus a clever inversion of those primordial questions: "Can you be fully human? Can you exercise restraint? Abdicate power? Accept danger? Can you bear what it means to be mortal?"

If Jesus's forty days in the wilderness is a time of self-creation, a time for the Son of God to decide who he is and how he will live out his calling, then here is what he chooses: he chooses emptiness over fullness. Obscurity over honour. Vulnerability over rescue.

At every instance when Jesus can reach for the magical, the glorious, and the safe, he reaches instead for the mundane, the invisible, and the risky.

The Gospel tells us that Jesus doesn't choose to enter the wilderness. The Spirit leads him there. But here's the rub: Jesus chooses to stay until the work of the wilderness is over.

We don't always choose to enter wildernesses, either. We don't volunteer for pain, loss, danger, or terror. But the wilderness happens. Whether it comes to us in the guise of a diagnosis, a hospital waiting room, a thorny relationship, a troubled child, a sudden death, or a crippling panic attack, the wilderness appears, unbidden and unwelcome, at our doorsteps.

And sometimes — can we bear to ponder this? — it is God's own Spirit who drives us into the barren places amidst the wild beasts. Does this mean that God wills bad things to happen to us? That God wants us to suffer? I don't think so. Does it mean that God can redeem even the most painful periods of

our lives, if we choose to stay and pay attention? Yes. Does it mean that the deserts in our lives journey can become holy even as they are dangerous? Yes, absolutely.

So maybe all of this means that it's time to follow Jesus into the desert. It's time to stay and look evil in the face. Time to hear evil's voice, recognise its temptation, and confess its appeal.

It's time to decide who we are and whose we are. It's a time to embrace all that it means to be human.

Human and hungry.

Human and vulnerable.

Human and beloved.

May we pray,

Lord, as you were led, so may we be led.

As you prevailed, might we too.

Amen.