

LENT 1 01-03-2020 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Genesis 2.15-17; 3.1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5.12-21;

*Matthew 4.1-11*

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.*

*He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.*

*The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."'*

*Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you", and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."'*

*Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."'*

*Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.'*

*Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.*

We are now in the season of Lent, which officially began on Ash Wednesday, and it lasts for the forty days until Easter. (Sundays are not counted.) Lent is the Christian season of preparation before Easter.

Lent is a time when many Christians prepare for Easter by observing a period of fasting, repentance, moderation and spiritual discipline. The purpose is to set aside time for reflection on Jesus Christ - his suffering and his sacrifice, his life, death, burial and resurrection.

You will notice some changes in the Sunday services: we don't sing the Gloria during Lent; we read the Ten Commandments instead of saying the Creed; we say the 'Prayer of Humble Access' ('We do not presume to come to your table...') which we do not usually say. The liturgical colour is purple or violet- symbolising penance and humility.

These are small changes, designed to remind us that this is a different season now. Just as the weather begins to change for Autumn- at least, we hope and pray it will!- so the seasons of the Church's year come around.

Easter is the most important festival of the year for us. Most of our society makes a much bigger deal of Christmas, but Easter is far more significant for Christians.

During Holy Week and on Easter Day we remember and celebrate the death and resurrection of our Saviour. Without the Easter event there would be no Christianity. Experiencing the Great Three Days – Maundy Thursday evening, Good Friday and Easter Sunday- gives us the whole story, fills in the gaps, and shows us who Jesus is. Which in turn, shows us who we are.

Before all of that, we journey through Lent and prepare ourselves for what lies ahead. The Bible readings for the Sundays of Lent give us more insight into the story and help us to understand why Jesus lived and died and was raised, and what it is all for.

Today's readings focus on temptation, sin, and the effects of sin. The reading from Genesis, the first book of the Bible, is taken from the creation story and tells how human beings fell into sin. The Psalm gives thanks for forgiveness, and expresses the relief of confessing wrong-doing and getting right again with God.

In the letter to the Roman church, Paul interprets the Genesis tradition in the light of Jesus, explaining in his complex style how Jesus has freed humanity from being bound up by sin.

Then in Matthew's Gospel we hear of Jesus, immediately following his baptism and before he began his ministry, going into the desert and being tempted.

It has long been the tradition of the church for Christians to go on retreat before being ordained. In the early church, people had a year of teaching before they were baptised, and then would spend time apart in prayer and silence before the big day. Going off into the wilderness, or going bush maybe, to spend time with God, is a tried and tested way to prepare for ministry. When there are no distractions we can really focus on God.

When we read this passage we need to keep in mind a few things that will help us understand it.

The first is that 'satan' came to be thought of as the source of temptation only in the later years of Judaism. The crafty serpent who spoke to Eve in the book of Genesis is not satan- just a smart snake. And it is only comparatively recently that satan has been thought of as an independent, powerful and evil being in opposition to God. Christianity has only one God, and there is no equal but opposite bad god we can blame for all the evil in the world.

Another factor in the background to this text is the experience of Israel, wandering in the wilderness for forty years. This was described as a time of testing, which the people failed many times. They were meant to learn to trust God, and realise that life consists of more than food and comfort.

The third and most important factor are the parallels between Jesus and Moses. Moses was taken to a high mountain and shown all the land as far as the eye could see; and he was with the Lord on the mountain for forty days, without food or drink. The author of this Gospel expects readers to recognise these parallels and understand that in Jesus, we see an even greater figure than Moses- one who could be completely obedient.

Three temptations of Jesus are described here: the temptation to turn stones into bread to satisfy his hunger; to perform a showy trick to win over the people by miraculously surviving after throwing himself from the tallest building in town; and to throw in his lot with satan, who promised him power and riches. Jesus answered each of these temptations with a quotation from Deuteronomy. These were the words that Moses spoke to the people as God had commanded him: Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Jesus showed that he took these words with total seriousness, and so must we. This single commitment of his life was the reason he resisted the temptations of turning rocks into food for himself, or performing miraculous signs, or getting political and military power in order to coerce people into faith.

Temptations always seem to be about finding an easier way to satisfy our needs and wants. In our day, we can be tempted to buy now and pay later, or even to steal now and hope to get away with it! Choosing the right way often means choosing the harder way, the way that involves work, patience and perseverance- and disappointment, too.

For Jesus, choosing the right way- choosing to love and obey God- led to his death, which seemed to everyone around at the time to be an absolute failure and the end of all hope. But it wasn't, which is why we celebrate his resurrection every single Sunday.

As we begin our journey through Lent together, we can choose to spend a bit of time in the wilderness too: time set apart from other distractions to pray, read the Bible, and grow in faith. We can join in one of the study groups or find our own Lenten focus.

Whatever we choose, we know that we are never in the wilderness by ourselves because we walk in the footsteps of our Lord.

The Lord be with you.