**Matthew 4:1-11**

**The Temptations of Jesus**

We have now entered the season of Lent, which is one of the most important seasons of the Christian liturgical year. And, at the outset we reflect on this passage from Matthew 4 about the temptation of Christ in the wilderness.

Normally, a preacher may start a sermon on this topic by asking the rhetorical question, “Have you ever been tempted?” But as I thought about starting my sermon with that question, I began reflecting on who I am as a person and have decided to ask the ‘more real’ question: “Have I ever stopped being tempted?”

My reality is that I live with temptation all the time: not a minute goes by, it seems to me, when I do not face temptation in one way or another…it is a not just a perennial problem for me: it is a state of being. And that is the case not because I am any more of a sinner than the rest of you or because I am weaker than the rest of you but because I live in a constant state of sin.

By nature – by sinful nature – I put Me at the centre of my universe and I am always looking out for ways to strengthen and please ‘I’. Of course, I can play the game and appear to be super-spiritual - but the reality is, because I am sinful and egotistical, I live in a constant state of temptation and so this story from the life of Christ is so important to me. And it’s important because I need some hope that there is actually a way out of my predicament and I need hope that the power of temptation will not master me.

So let’s reflect on this passage for a few minutes and see what we have to learn from it.

The context of it is very important, I think. The temptation of Jesus in the wilderness comes immediately after the story of his baptism by John in the River Jordan. What an incredible moment that must have been in the life of Christ: baptised by his cousin and then a voice from heaven declares before the crowd: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!” This must have been one of the most wonderful moments of Jesus’ life. It must have been a moment that was a real spiritual high when he felt so affirmed and so loved by God, so intimate with his Father, and so focussed on his ministry. After the baptism, Jesus must have felt so spiritually strong and confident…

And then we read in verse 1: “Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.” This is an interesting but difficult verse to understand.

Firstly, “Jesus was led…” In Mark’s account, the Greek is even stronger: he wrote, “The Spirit drove Jesus…” Jesus had just been baptised and was about to take control of his destiny by beginning his ministry on earth but, immediately, he forgoes his power: “Jesus was led…”

Right from the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus was a servant, obeying the will of God.

“Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.” The very purpose of the Spirit’s leading of Jesus into the desert was so that he might be tempted by the devil. That is an incredible thought! Why should God the Father inflict such a terrible experience on his Son? Why should the Spirit collude with this torturous event?

Perhaps it was the only way that God the Son could truly empathise with us. If he was to become sin for us, if he was to stand with us in our frailty, he had to experience our broken humanity in its fullness. If Christ were not tempted, he could not stand with us, or stand for us.

So there is something imperative about this story: it has to happen in order for the Gospel to become a reality. “Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.” It had to happen…

But even though there was an imperative about this: “Jesus was driven by the Spirit in order to…”, there is also a sense in which Jesus’ freedom to respond to the temptation is crucial to the narrative itself. Because even though it was the Father’s plan and the Spirit’s imperative, Jesus chose to resist the temptations.

And that, in itself, is important because in choosing to resist, Jesus reverses the effects of the Fall in the Garden of Eden. Remember in Genesis 3, the serpent tempted Adam and Eve and they chose, by their free will, not to resist. And here we are, no longer in a Garden but in a wilderness and the devil tempts Jesus. But unlike Adam and Eve, he chooses, by his free will, to resist, and so the curse begins to be undone.

So let’s look at the temptations themselves…

Verse 2: “After fasting for forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, ‘If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.’ Jesus answered, ‘It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'”

Jesus had been fasting forty days and forty nights before the first temptation. This is a point often missed because we often think about this story as if the temptations are sort of evenly-spread throughout Jesus’ time in the wilderness. But that’s not the case.

Jesus had been there for more than forty days and, by now, Jesus is famished: he is tired, he is hungry, he is weak, he is vulnerable. Fasting is difficult. If you have tried it, you will know how tough it is…Fasting for forty days and nights must be a complete assault on the body, let alone doing it in the middle of a wilderness in solitary confinement! And it is at Jesus’ most vulnerable point that the devil makes his first assault. This is not a game for the devil: he goes for the kill right at the very beginning. Jesus is starving so: “The tempter came to him and said, ‘If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.’”

What is this temptation that Jesus undergoes? It’s nothing less than the temptation for immediate personal gratification.

And this is a temptation we all face on a daily basis. It seems that our whole society is geared up for this. As each generation passes, we are getting worse at waiting: whatever it is, we want it now – and, actually, we can have it now, so it doesn’t even feel like a temptation anymore…

I was reading this week a sermon on this passage and the preacher rightly said that, these days patience is no longer a virtue; it has been turned into a vice.

The pursuit of instant gratification is the placing of my needs at the centre of the universe and I will pursue them, whatever that may mean for others…

But Jesus, by his free will, resists the temptation and he quotes Deuteronomy 8:3 in his defence: “We do not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God’. Christ chooses not to pursue personal gratification but chooses instead to make the pursuit of God his top priority. He knows his mission, he knows who he is, and chooses to trust in God completely.

We know who we are, we know our calling to be children of God, and, as Christians, we know that we do not fulfil our destiny by pursuing personal gratification. Now, that is not to say that God’s way is always opposed to our way or that, to fulfil our destiny, we must be miserable and never be happy because we are in constant submission to God. Some Christians behave as if that were the truth…But, in the final analysis, our way must always be God’s way, and it is there that we find our ultimate happiness - even when that does not always accord with our personal gratification.

Firstly, then, Jesus resists the temptation for personal, immediate gratification. But that does not work and so the devil visits him for a second time, verse 4: “Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. ‘If you are the Son of God, he said, throw yourself down. For it is written: He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'”

Interesting, of course, that the devil decides to quote Scripture back to Jesus in his second attempt at temptation: Psalm 91:11-12. It’s not just the faithful who know the word of God…

But Jesus refuses to give in to this temptation, which is the temptation to use the sensational to attract people to you.

We don’t need to be the Son of God to be tempted by this. Don’t we love to be loved? Don’t we want to be thought of as wonderful people? Aren’t we attracted by the thought of being attractive? Yet again, this is an example of us wanting to put the ‘Ego I’ at the centre of our world rather than God.

But Jesus, through his free will, chooses to resist and, again uses Scripture from Deuteronomy to do that: 6:16: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test”.

Finally, the devil takes Jesus to a mountain and tempts him with worldly power, verse 8: “Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. ‘All this I will give you, he said, if you will bow down and worship me.’”

We look around us at the world today and we see so many leaders who have given in to this temptation. But we are mindful of our own petty pursuits for power and how we are prepared to push people aside so we can have control.

But Jesus, of his own free will, chooses to resist because he knows that these kingdoms are not in the devil’s gift anyway. All authority in heaven and on earth are Christ’s. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords.

So Jesus stands with us in our temptations. He truly knows what it is to face temptation and he has shown us that it is possible to resist temptation if we are constantly soaked in the word of God and the intimacy of a relationship with the Father.

As we move forward through the season of Lent, it is good for us to remember the physical and spiritual cost to Christ. It is good for us to resolve ourselves afresh to be soaked in the word of God and to seek a new intimacy with the Father so we can be stronger in our resistance to temptation. Ultimately, it is only in the strength of the Spirit and through the cross of Christ that the victory over sin and death is won. But we have our part to play in the skirmishes and the battles and we pray today for strength to resist. And, as we prepare to come to Communion, we give thanks to God for what Jesus was prepared to endure so we could be free.