

Lent sermon series for St Peter's, Limpsfield  
1st Sunday of Lent, 1st March 2020  
(All-Age Eucharist)

**A journey through our humanity,  
with Jesus**

*Rev James Percival*

Two:       **TEMPTATIONS**   *The Devil*  
              Matthew 4:1-11

I enjoyed hosting a visit from one of our school reception classes this week. There were lots of questions from the children, including much interest in this sand [[Godly Play desert box](#)]. I told them that I sometimes use it to tell bible stories from the desert.

Early in the Old Testament, in the book of Exodus, God's people wander for forty years in the desert. Then in the book of Deuteronomy (still only the fifth book of the Jewish Torah, and the Bible), the first sermon from Moses recounts those forty years of wilderness wanderings which had led to the promised land, and ends with an exhortation to observe the law (that is, the teachings), later referred to as the Law of Moses.

This story of the temptations of Jesus from Matthew's gospel echoes the experience of God's people Israel in the desert.

Like God's people, Jesus is tempted by hunger; like God's people, he is tempted not trust but to put God to the test;

like God's people, he is tempted to idolatry (that is, to make and worship other gods).

On each occasion Jesus quotes from the book of Deuteronomy in reply to the devil. Unlike God's people, Jesus does not murmur or give in to temptation. Moses also fasts for forty days and forty nights. So Jesus is the new Moses.

In the bible, the devil is the same as Satan and Beelzebul, the enemy who tempts Jesus and tempts us. Remember, the tempter does not necessarily have horns and tap us on the shoulder, but can spring up in our hearts and in our lives and in lots of different ways.

Because of how we are as human beings, both wonderful and in need of saving, we have it in our hearts to give in to these temptations - to our appetites, to our pride and independence, and to our ambitions. Our hearts are divided.

In resisting the devil's temptations, Jesus refuses the easier way and chooses the hard road of obedience to God, channelling his appetites, trust and ambitions to the work and glory of God. In the end this brings him to the suffering of the cross and the glory of Easter.

So it is for us. Each of the temptations is a temptation to bypass the cross. Wouldn't it be nice to get to the glory of Easter without going through the pain of the cross - whatever the crosses are that we have to carry?  
Yes of course.

But Jesus couldn't. And we can't either.

Notice that the devil knows and quotes the bible. As we might know from some of the ways in which scripture has been and is still used in the world to justify and encourage violence and oppression of various kinds.

One of our hopes as a ministry team going forwards is the building up of the people of God here with the knowledge and understanding of scripture that can help us - like Jesus - to resist temptation.

Notice too that the Spirit leads us into these testing times, and it is not wrong to be tempted. But what do we then do about it? That is crucial.

The thing about the wilderness is that there is nothing in it. Throughout the bible, the desert is where God leads us in order to speak to us in a heart-to-heart conversation. Yet the desert is also the place of hunger, thirst and spiritual combat. The desert magnifies whatever is going on inside us, because our usual distractions are not there. That is the idea of giving something up for Lent - to help us better to notice how things really are.

Perhaps the most dangerous temptations we face are the ones we don't even recognise. It's one thing to give up TV, as I heard at school this week; or alcohol, or chocolate. It might be even harder to give up grumbling, or judging people harshly and treating people unkindly.

However much we've done in and given to God's church over the years, there's a challenge for us. If we're taking something up for Lent, our church as well as the world could do with more loving kindness, please, in how we treat one another.

And the gift of Lent is not a trip for our own will-power, but an opportunity to deepen our relationship with God. Lent can help us to look afresh, to notice again and more deeply.

However we find things really are for us, we can come to God just as we are. And God will hear us, and accept us, just as we are.

When we fail and turn away - as we will sometimes -and give in to temptations that lead us away from the loving, painful, glorious way that Jesus invites us to follow, don't despair or give up on God. Sin assumes we are independent of God, and so it takes us out of relationship with God.

Instead, better to admit our need, and depend again on God. We, too, each one of us, are part of the ongoing battle for God's kingdom to be established on earth. Every successful fight against temptation is one more step on the road to the ultimate victory. And when we do succeed in resisting temptation, we will find - in the mysterious and wonderful spirit of Christ - that the angels come and wait on us, too. And help good fruit to grow in our lives. May it be so for us all this Lent.

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