

PENWORTHAM UNITED REFORMED CHURCH

Sermon for Sunday 5th March 2017

Reading: Matthew 4:1–11 (NRSV) *The Temptation of Jesus*

God; the reply to every temptation placed before Jesus: rely on God, trust God, serve God.

Our story begins last week with Jesus entering the wilderness to listen to John the Baptist. John has been the subject of much discussion throughout Israel, in synagogue and Temple, home and workplace, in market-place and field, and John has attracted crowds to hear him.

Jesus comes to hear John's message of repentance and of the coming of God's kingdom, and joins the queue to be baptised.

Then, as he comes up from the water, the heavens are opened and he sees the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And Jesus hears a voice from heaven saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Then before he has chance to bask in this affirmation, or talk about it with John, friends, or family, he is led by that same Spirit into the wilderness.

After a life-changing spiritual experience at his baptism, Jesus fasts for forty days and forty nights, and reflects upon what all this could mean.

Fasting is a spiritual exercise. It has long been used, along with prayer, to draw closer to God. Jesus has committed himself to solitude, to limit his intake of food and water, to reflection and to prayer, in order to better understand the meaning of the heavenly revelation: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

As well as Jesus quoting passages from the Old Testament in reply to each temptation, there are other echoes from Jewish history in this passage.

As well as 'forty days and forty nights' being symbolic of the 40 years of the Exodus, of Israel's journey from bondage in Egypt to liberation in the Promised Land, it is also the same duration of Moses' fast before receiving the Ten Commandments and Elijah's time in the wilderness. It is also the duration of Noah's flood, which also links back to Jesus' baptism with the descending dove.

His time in the wilderness places three questions before Jesus: firstly - "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

In the Exodus story the Jewish people travelled trusting in God, well most of the time, and God provided manna in the morning, quails in the evening, and water split from rocks.

Jesus was hungry, the ability to perform miracles could remove this inconvenience and he could transform the rocks around him not only into enough bread to satisfy himself, but also all of the people.

There was a famous Roman saying: "Two things only the people anxiously desire — bread and circuses."

The government kept the Roman populace happy by distributing free food and staging huge spectacles. Jesus could do the same, but even grander. Also cheaper, as he wouldn't have to buy any bread, in this way he could keep everyone on side.

So we have a symbolic and a political interpretation, but there is also a biblical one as Jesus replies: "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Which is pretty much a direct quote of Deuteronomy 8: 3.

The second question: "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 is transported to, or has a vision of the view from, the pinnacle of the Temple. This time the words of temptation are also a quote from scripture, in this case Psalm 91: 11-12.

Here Jesus is challenged to place himself in danger and force God to save him. This is a jump to safety, to escape and be caught in the arms of angels. In his refusal, Jesus rejects this path and commits to one of danger and hardship.

His response is again a quote from Deuteronomy, but this time from 6:16: "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" "

Then the third, and final, question: "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

Again, Jesus is transported to, or has a vision of the view from, the top of a mountain and sees all of the world's kingdoms.

The tempter is repeating an existing Old Testament messianic promise, directly from Psalm 2:8 and inferred in Psalm 72:8. Jesus has before him the same offer being made by God and by the tempter.

Jesus' commitment to God is clear as he commands the tempter to depart, and he again quotes from Deuteronomy, 6:13: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'

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Then, in affirmation of him successfully facing this time of trial, angels appear to care for him.

The story of the Temptations is the starting point for our journey through Lent.

The next six weeks, forty days plus the Sundays, is a time of reflecting on our faith as we prepare for the central festival of the Christian year.

This time of reflection is something we can do by ourselves, by giving something up, taking something up, committing to daily readings or other spiritual exercise, or we can even, if we are careful, give fasting a go.

It is also something we can do together. One way of reinforcing what we've decided to do by ourselves is to tell someone about it. They can then support us, cajole us, and, knowing someone might ask how it's going, can also be an encouragement.

On Wednesday, a group of us began the Churches Together in Britain and Ireland Lent course 'Returning Home: Christian Faith in Encounter with Other Faiths' exploring how Christian faith has been deepened and enriched by encounters with people of different religions. And it's not too late to join in – copies are at the back!

Over the coming weeks our Sunday gospel readings will explore what it means to be born from above, living water, to have spiritual sight, to share resurrection life, and Jesus' humble, joyful, and demonstrative arrival in Jerusalem.

Then after this time of preparation we will enter into Holy Week ready to face the biggest questions there are about life and faith.

Holy Week holds within it all aspects of life and faith. Joy and fellowship, fear and betrayal, and everything in-between. There is much for us to reflect upon, and much to be missed if all we do is experience the joy of Palm Sunday and Easter Day, and do not walk the path of the days between.

We will break bread and share wine in the upper room with Jesus, the disciples, and in fellowship with the Church in every place, all of those that have gone before us, and will come after us.

We will weep and pray with Jesus in the darkness and fear of Gethsemane. We will question whether we would fall asleep, betray or flee like the disciples?

We'll hide in the shadows with Peter as Jesus is questioned, and stand in the crowd questioning whether we would join in, or risk all and declare his name.

Wonder whether we would flee, or stand with the women, as he is nailed to the cross and breathes his last. If we'd risk our position to do the right thing as Joseph of Arimathea did?

Face the emptiness, grief, and confusion of the time between. The abyss of Holy Saturday.

Then we will celebrate the joy of Resurrection! But we will wonder if, when faced with the liberation inherent in living the Resurrection, we would remain silent, return home, or declare it to all?

In this time of Lent, we are preparing ourselves for facing the biggest questions there are about life and faith. This is a journey we share together in the weeks ahead, and for which we need each other to see through.

God; the reply to every temptation placed before Jesus: rely on God, trust God, serve God. This is our prayer as we begin our journey through Lent, Holy Week, and the months and years ahead: rely on God, trust God, serve God.

Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart. **Amen**
Psalm 32:11