

Sermon for 6th March 2022, Year C, First Sunday of Lent

Preached at All Saints Biddenden and St Michael Smarden

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Romans 10:8b-13; **Luke 4:1-13**

Sermon

And so, here we are in the season of Lent – a word which apparently comes from the old English ‘lencten’, meaning ‘spring season’. The idea of a 40-day Lenten season of fasting and repentance leading up to Easter was probably created – or at least formalised – at the council of Nicea in the early fourth century. In those days, most new Christians were welcomed into the Church and baptised on Easter day, and so the weeks of Lent represented a solemn period of preparation for the candidates who were about to begin a radically new life as part of God’s family.

And why does Lent last forty days? We have the answer in today’s reading from Luke’s gospel. Jesus fasted and was tempted by the devil in the wilderness for forty days – forty being that generic period of time which could mean just about anything. The Israelites spent 40 years wandering the wilderness before entering the promised land. Rain fell for 40 days and nights during the great biblical flood. Moses spent three periods of 40 days and nights on Mount Sinai. 40 days was the period between Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, and so on. In any case, Jesus was in the wilderness for quite a while, learning what it meant to be God’s Son.

I think it’s important to understand that Jesus has no doubt about his identity. Even though the devil starts his temptations by saying “*if* you are the Son of God”, this could also be translated as “*since* you are the Son of God”. The appearance of the Holy Spirit at Jesus’ baptism has already answered the

question of *whether* he is God's Son; what remains to be determined is what kind of Son he is going to be.

Often, the story of the temptation of Jesus is portrayed as Jesus making choices to resist using his power for selfish purposes. So, he must choose whether or not to make food out of stones for himself when he's hungry, or whether to rule the world for his own benefit, or whether to test God's promise to protect him with angels. But the devil's testing is more subtle and devious than that. Jesus isn't being offered purely selfish alternatives to obedience to God, but opportunities to do good in the world.

If Jesus can make bread from stones, by implication he can also feed the many hungry people living in a land that often suffered from famine – it is a temptation to feed all the people, just as God did through Moses with manna and quails. Surely this is a good thing? Since you are the Son of God, Jesus, *why wouldn't* you feed everyone if you can?

Jesus replies using the words of Moses, that people need more than bread to flourish. Bread is good, but Jesus is here to bring more than bread.

Then the devil offers Jesus the chance to rule the world. This sounds incredibly evil, but at the time, Jesus's world was ruled and occupied by the heavy fist of Rome and its empire. In that context, wouldn't regime change be a good thing? Surely, if Jesus were in charge, the world would be a much better place, full of righteousness and justice? It's not about Jesus ruling the world for his own benefit, but think of the opportunities to make it a better place for everyone! Isn't that worth Jesus bowing down to the devil? Show a little humility for the sake of humanity, perhaps?

But Jesus refuses. The highest principle in the Jewish and now Christian faith is to worship God and serve only him. Playing the world's game even for an apparently good purpose risks falling into the same trap as all the other kings

and leaders. You start off with the best intentions but before you know it, you're clinging to power by any means possible.

Finally, the devil issues his third challenge. Does Jesus really trust God? In Psalm 91, God has promised to protect all those who are righteous: "For he shall give his angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. They shall bear you in their hands, lest you dash your foot against a stone". What better way to get those collaborator priests in Jerusalem to reform their ways by proving your righteousness in a leap from their holy Temple? I mean, come on Jesus, why waste all this time trying to win over people one heart at a time when you could make a big show and sort out the world in one fell swoop?!

Again, Jesus refuses. To do such a thing would be to distrust and disobey God. Even the best possible ends cannot justify these means. This is not what it means to be the Son of God.

It's not that Jesus ignores these needs in the world in favour of rigid adherence to the rules. We know from many stories in the gospels that Jesus repeatedly set aside religious rules in order to show God's love to people. He simply does it in a way that emphasises and sustains our relationship with God, rather than undermines it. He refused to turn stones into bread, but he does feed the hungry. He refused to take political power, but the focus of his teaching and his whole life is justice, peace and mercy, sharing wealth and caring for the poor and oppressed. And even though he refused to jump from the temple to prove that angels would catch him, he goes to the Cross, certain of God's love and power to conquer death. Jesus doesn't go seeking or asking for trials and struggles to test God, but he knows they cannot be avoided if he wants to do God's will.

And so, the purpose of Lent in the Christian calendar is to offer us the time and opportunity to learn to walk the path with Jesus in total solidarity with him. Over the centuries, Christians have developed all kinds of Lenten practices, such as giving up meat or alcohol, or chocolate, or social media, and so on. Or perhaps

taking on new practices such as regular prayer, fasting, walking pilgrimages, giving to charity, caring for the environment, or acts of social justice. Many of these things are very good in themselves for our physical and mental health, but perhaps even more importantly they encourage us to remember that we are God's children, brothers and sisters of Jesus, called to be his arms of love in the world. Whether we give things up, or take on new practices, we are intentionally bringing ourselves closer to God, and the closer we come to God, the more we are transformed to be like him.

This is, after all, the goal of our faith. Seek God. Draw close to God. Encounter God's love. Join the family of God. Be transformed by God. Offer God's love. Lent is a time of opportunity to go deeper in understanding the mystery of God being among us and with us during our struggles and suffering, and in our wandering in the wilderness. Whether we have only been Christians for a very short time, or for most of our lives, Lent is a powerful opportunity to go deeper in our relationship with God, to refocus our lives, to put down roots into the deep soil of our faith and nurture new growth in our character and wisdom. If we only take Lent as an opportunity to lose a little weight, we are missing out on a grand adventure.