

Sermon for All Saints' Highgate, Sunday, 6 March 2022

Rediscovering our Vocation (Luke 4:1-13)

⁴ Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.

³ The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' ⁴ Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone."' "

⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' ⁸ Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' "

⁹ Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you", ¹¹ and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."' ¹² Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."' "

¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

I wonder what you're giving up for Lent. Or, perhaps, instead you're taking up something new, as a spiritual discipline. Whichever, Lent is typically a time to reflect on what's standing in the way between you and God. And to take action to remove that barrier. Remove it, so that you shorten the gap between you and God. And can thus draw closer in your relationship with God.

As Luke records, after his baptism, Jesus is driven out into the Judean desert by the Holy Spirit. And there endures three temptations. What I'd like to explore with you this morning is this: what these temptations are really about; and, also, what these temptations have to do with us, here at All Saint's Highgate, in 2022.

So what *are* these temptations of Jesus all about? Well, the first thing to note is that there'll all connected with Israel, the chosen people of God. When the Israelites were driven out into the Sinai desert after the exodus from Egypt, they experienced an extended season of testing. The season tested whether they could fulfil their calling to be a blessing to the other nations of the earth. As you'll likely recall, the Israelites didn't do too well at passing their test. There was a lot of whingeing, berating of God, wishing they could go back to the comforts of Egypt, and worshipping of golden calves.

Jesus is therefore following in the same path, re-living the trials of Israel, and having both his humanity and his divinity fully tested. As we see by the conclusion of this story, it's clear that Jesus passes his test. By the end of his season in the wilderness, Jesus is ready to move out of the shadows, and into a public ministry of proclamation and healing. He's ready to fulfil God's purpose for his life.

There's a sense in which, metaphorically speaking, All Saints' Highgate is in the wilderness at present. We're no longer in the glory years of the church. Rather,

we're in what we might call, "the wilderness years". As I look at it, I think we're being tested to see whether we have a future as a church. And, if we are to have a future, what shape the church is called to. A shape that can be genuinely of service to the people of this part of north London. There's a real question about whether we're going to have a significant public ministry. And my sense is: the jury's still out. We're part-way through our test – but we've not yet passed it.

In some ways, though, I'm jumping ahead. Let's turn therefore to look at the three temptations that Jesus endures, to see what they're each about. And to explore what they might have to do with us, and with our time of testing in the wilderness.

Jesus' first temptation is to turn stones into bread. On the surface, this is about his hunger after an extended period of fasting. But what does this temptation really represent? It's about the temptation to live a life satisfied by basic needs. Food. Clothing. Shelter. Procreation. Family. It's about wanting to be comforted, about seeking to be warm and cosy. At one level, there's nothing wrong with this. And if you're deprived of these basic necessities, as many people in Ukraine are being deprived today, you suddenly discover quite how important and valuable they are.

But the point that Jesus makes to the great tempter isn't to say, "We shouldn't need or want these things." Jesus never says 'no' to the tempter. He says, simply: "Those necessities, they're not enough." What truly gives us life, the fulness of life that God wants for us all, is more than this. Jesus says, "You need the very words of God. You need the living Word of God." That's the truth. We need him. And what's been striking among some of the coverage of the violence in Ukraine, is that many Ukrainians seem to know this. Many have sought and shown their dependency on God. More than anything, they've realised that's what they most need. They need Jesus.

What about us here at All Saints? We may be emotionally wrung out by the horrors happening in Ukraine. We may suffer some consequential economic impacts of the war. But, in the midst of having all our daily needs met, have we really re-discovered our deep need of God? The temptation is to be satisfied with our comfortable lives. Jesus' challenge to us is this: "That's not enough, my people." The truth is, God wants more *for* us; and more *of* us.

Let's turn to Jesus' second temptation. This is the tempter's offer of the world's glory. A glory represented by the kingdoms of this world. What's this got to do with Israel? Well, it's less to do with their time in the Sinai desert, and more to do with their occupation of the land. It's the temptation to want to possess, to control, and to exclude others. And once Israel's possession of the land simply reflected the ways of the world around them, and no longer reflected God's ways of justice, sharing and equality –

then God took the land from Israel. They were despatched into a second wilderness, that of the extended exile in Babylon.

For Jesus, the temptation is bigger. It's to control the whole wide world through the exercise of power and authority. This is primarily a test of how he's going to use his divinity. What Jesus refuses, is what the Russian President couldn't resist. The power to dominate and destroy. In Putin's case in order to expand the kingdom of the Russian Federation. In contrast, Jesus affirmed a different type of kingdom, one that he called the kingdom of heaven. That's what Jesus went on to teach about. That's what he went on to live out and model in his public ministry. A peaceable kingdom. A kingdom of sharing, of blessing, of healing, of inclusive community.

So, what's this temptation about for us? At one level, it's a temptation that we face individually, each day. We're tempted to want to control things in our lives, and in the lives of other people. It's a temptation to want to call the shots; or to possess more than we've already got. This might be in our families or households. It might be here in the local church, thinking we should determine what shape the church's life should take, in small or big ways. Or, it might be at work, or in our local communities. You'll know the arena where you face the greatest temptation to want to exercise this type of control, or to possess more than you already have.

What does it look like corporately? It might express itself in our desire to have our own dedicated parish priest. Instead of one shared with a neighbouring parish – or – who knows – perhaps shared with two other parishes at some point in the future. Alternatively, it could be about wanting to preserve this church building as a space primarily for our Sunday worship, rather than as a local community resource. It gets reflected in the mindset that we don't have enough to share. Rather than believing that God gives us more than enough to share – if we can align ourselves better with the ways of the kingdom of heaven, and if we can receive all that God and our neighbours have to share with us.

The answer to this second temptation, as Jesus revealed, is that we need to learn, and re-learn, that our lives aren't meant to be about building our own mini-empires. They're meant to be about serving God. They're intended to be about blessing other people. They're meant to be about putting God's priorities of sharing and loving ahead of our own self-service. Is that an easy lesson to learn and live out? You can bet it's not. But Lent is a good time to revisit it.

As if these two temptations weren't enough, Jesus faces a third. The temptation is to throw himself down from the top of the temple, and look for God to save him. It's the temptation to be the centre of the story. And it's the temptation to believe that God should protect us from all harm. That's what this temptation is about.

For the people of Israel, this is the temptation to believe that because they're the chosen people of God, then the story is all about them. That they come first in God's world, and everyone else is secondary. But as Jesus affirmed, God could raise up children of Abraham from the dead stones, if God wanted. The story that really matters isn't about Israel. It's about God. And God never promises to save his people from suffering, or to protect them from poverty. To believe that, is to believe in a prosperity gospel which has no place in the heavenly kingdom. But it's a temptation we can fall prey to: the temptation to believe that if we're good Christians, then harm shouldn't befall us; or that if we pray hard enough, God will deliver us from injury.

Whenever we try to use prayer as a magic wand; whenever we think that God should do for us what we want, because "We're Christians after all," then we're falling prey to this temptation. Whenever we think: "If God blesses me with a share in the riches of this world, then it's the sign that God truly does loves me," – when we say that to ourselves, then we're listening to the tempter's voice. God never promises us an easy ride. God never offers to save us from suffering. Because the story, the big story that matters, isn't primarily about us. We're not the centre. The great temptation is to put ourselves at the centre. Therefore, whenever we make decisions that are just about us, and don't reflect the impact that those decisions might have on others, we're falling prey to this temptation to make the story all about us. Whether those are decisions about how we use our money, whether we get vaccinated or not, what we do with our time or how we use our energies, the question we face is: who are we really serving? Are we just being self-serving? Or are we living in a way that will be a blessing to others, and that will help grow the heavenly kingdom?

Ultimately, Jesus negates this temptation, not by directly refusing it; but instead by offering himself: the temple of his body, to be broken for the world. Rather than securing protection from harm, he offers his own blood to be shed for our sakes. And for the sake of all the inhabitants of the earth, and all of creation. This doesn't save us from enduring the trials and tribulations of this life. It doesn't save us from global warming. It doesn't prevent warfare in Ukraine or elsewhere. But it does save us *for* the life everlasting, the life to come, where we'll enjoy God's presence to the full. And, as we will shortly mark through our eucharistic meal, it offers us a foretaste of that heaven here, and now.

Let's review briefly. Three temptations. First, to be satisfied with a comfortable life. Second, to want to exercise control, or possess more. Third, to put ourselves at the centre of the story. Jesus invites us to resist these temptations. By prioritising seeking him; by laying down our lives in service of others; and by receiving his life into ourselves.

If you've found my message this morning uncomfortable, I'm not going to apologise. Lent isn't about feeling comfortable. It's about doing some critical self-examination individually, and collectively.

What are we each doing here in north London?

And why does All Saints' Highgate exist?

Those are two questions that I'm inviting you to wrestle with this Lent. The good news, is that if we're in earnest about facing those questions, then we can expect to hear God's voice speaking to us, just as God spoke to Jesus in the wilderness. Amen.