

Readings for the First Sunday in Lent

9th March 2025

First Reading: Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Moses spoke to the people saying: When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us." When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, you shall make this response before the Lord your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me." You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.

Second Reading: Romans 10:8b-13

What does scripture say? "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Gospel: St Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 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. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 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. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

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, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

A Reflection for the First Sunday in Lent

‘Life is not a problem to be solved but a reality to be experienced’.

This quotation, and many variations of it, have been attributed to authors ranging from A.A. Milne, in words spoken by Winnie the Pooh, to Soren Kierkegaard, the 19th century Danish theologian and philosopher, though, when you try to pin it down, as I have tried this week, the actual source is elusive (please let me know if you find it). However, the reason it sprang to mind was because I think that one could say something similar about Lent.

Lent began on Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, with its theme of repentance and returning to God, literally in ashes. With its strapline of FAST, PRAY, GIVE representing the Lenten disciplines, the season is usually seen as one of denial. Although this is part of it, I think we can view this penitential season in a more positive light. After all, we know that denial in some circumstances is good for us and our well-being. So what might FAST, PRAY, GIVE mean for us this Lent?

To go back to that quotation, or rather to a thought based on it: Lent is not a problem to be solved, or even a season to be endured until we finally reach Easter. It is a season of journeying, a season to be experienced and enriched by. It is a season of transformation, just as we see the world around us being transformed as spring emerges – transformation not to achieve perfection but to take a few more small steps on our journey with God, with one another and with all of God’s world.

The Rev’d Dr Rachel Mash is the co-ordinator of the Anglican Communion Environmental Network. Commenting on today’s Gospel passage, Luke’s familiar account of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness, she said that Jesus was confronted with three temptations that we also face, temptations that should challenge us to reconsider our values this Lent. She continued that Lent is ‘a time to seek for a renewed and restored relationship with God, with one another and with Creation.’ So, let us consider those temptations.

The first temptation, turning stones into bread seems not unreasonable; after all, Jesus was famished, he had been in the wilderness a long time. His response, ‘One does not live by bread alone’ is only part of the full quotation from Deuteronomy (8:3): ‘one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord’. Jesus recognised that he was in the wilderness for a purpose, he had been led there by the Holy Spirit to prepare for his ministry, to deepen his relationship with God, a relationship that would sustain him in that ministry. It is a reminder that we have to distinguish between wants and needs. Jesus was hungry and may have wanted bread, but he needed the relationship with God more. Of course, this is not to justify denial of food to the starving. But we live in a society that demands instant gratification and surrounds us with advertisements for things that we are told are ‘must haves’ but which, in reality, are no such thing: the latest gadget, an expensive car, a fancy holiday. Do we give in to our desires for these things, or do we fast from them?

We have a choice, though granted the right choice is not always immediately clear to us, so we need to pray for guidance in how to make the best choices, to have hearts and minds of discernment. As another quotation of uncertain provenance says, can we choose to 'live more simply, that others may simply live'? Without even considering what we do with the money we save, we give back to others and to the earth simply by reducing our over-consumption of the world's resources. Fast, pray, give.

The second temptation that Jesus faced was to bow down to power. Abuse of worldly power, controlling and manipulating other people for one's own ends has never gone away, but seems to be particularly overt just at the moment. Our world is dominated by political and economic power with an ever-widening gap between rich and poor. Jesus' response 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him"' recognises that his and our responsibility is to put God's priorities first.

We are all people who hold some power in the world. We may not be political leaders or have controlling interests in big industry or modern tech, but we live in a relatively wealthy and democratic country. We choose how to spend our money, or where to invest it. We choose how to vote. We choose our sources of information – increasingly important in an age of misinformation. We can choose to do so in ways that simply create the best outcome for ourselves, or we can choose to prioritise the needs of others. If we wish, we can choose to use our money and our influence to lobby our politicians and others to stand up for the rights of the poor, marginalised and dispossessed. Do we bow down to the powerful structures of the world with our own interests at heart or do we fast from self-interest and make a stand for justice? Do we pray for those who take a stand for others? And what about those in positions of power, especially those who we consider to be abusing the power they hold, do we pray for them? And how can we, as members of God's church, give our support, our time and our resources, to allow the voices of the least advantaged in the world to be heard and seek justice for them? Fast, pray, give.

And then the third temptation Jesus faced was to become like God, to play games with God by throwing himself off the Temple so that the angels would come to catch him. God-given ingenuity and creativity have brought the human race to a point where we have disciplines such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), genetic engineering, and weapons systems all with powers that would have been unimaginable to earlier generations. Collectively, we have become like gods, with power to use our skills for good or evil, yet collectively are making a fairly good job of destroying the world and believing the alternative salvation story that tells us science and technology will sort it all out. Jesus' response to this temptation was 'It is said "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."'

It's true that many new developments have huge potential for good, but a difficulty is that their development is outpacing human capacity to recognise and evaluate their moral implications and the likelihood of unanticipated side effects. This is difficult for us as individuals as most of us lack expertise to make realistic judgments about them. So how do we avoid putting God to the test in such circumstances? Perhaps we can fast from going with the flow, ignoring things we think we don't understand, and try at least to recognise the pros and cons of new developments, bearing in mind the needs of all God's world. We can pray for the scientists and business people at the cutting edge of new technology, that they will have the humility to recognise the moral aspects of their work and temper their thirst for knowledge, and the profit that comes from exploiting change, with the need to reflect on possible unintended consequences or mis-use. And we can give voice to the sacredness of God's creation, our part in it and

our responsibility to take steps both to mitigate the damage already caused and to reduce further damage. Fast, pray, give.

Three temptations that Jesus faced that we also face in our own time: distinguishing between wants and needs in a materialistic society; putting God's priorities first in the face of worldly power and its mis-use; recognising the sacredness and inter-connectedness of God's creation that seems threatened by uncontrolled change. Three sets of opportunities to challenge our values, to fast, pray and give as we reflect on our lives and on the world. Lent is not a problem to be solved, or a season to be endured, but a time of growth and transformation in which we take steps on our journey to a renewed and restored relationship with God, with one another and with Creation. Where do our values need to change? Where do our relationships need to be renewed and restored? Food for thought this Lent, I hope.