

Readings for the First Sunday in Lent

22nd February 2026

First Reading: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?' The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die."' But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Second Reading: Romans 5:12-19

Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned – sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgement following one trespass brought condemnation but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so the act of righteousness of one leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one person's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Gospel: St Matthew 4:1-11

Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."' Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, '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 said to him, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”’ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”’ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

A Reflection for the First Sunday in Lent

from Rev'd Anne Macdonald

Well, have you thought about what you are “doing” for Lent? Chocolate again? I thought about coffee but had a headache just thinking about it.

In a way the popular view of Lent has turned it into some sort of wellbeing festival – we will explore that a bit later on – but first of all we are going to look at today’s Gospel reading and see if we can tease out what it means for us.

Today’s reading follows on directly from the Gospel we read in mid-January about John the Baptist, baptising Jesus. In that passage Jesus had been publicly recognised by God as his “son, the beloved”. The next sentence and the first sentence of this Sunday’s Gospel is: “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil”.

Why did he not go straight into his ministry? There was a lot to do and not that much time to accomplish it. Why not build on the momentum from his baptism? Did the spirit lead him into the wilderness because he needed to face head on the challenges the Devil would throw at him before he started his ministry. He would face many challenges in the following three years, culminating in the events of Good Friday and could it be that this visit to the wilderness was a key part of his preparation.

We have probably all seen pictures of the wilderness around the Middle East and some of us have even been fortunate enough to visit the Holy Land. It is arid, greenery is sparse and the sky is big. There is space but it is not empty. Now if you have ever walked in the Flow Country or visited the moors of the Western Isles or sat on the tops of mountains you will know that the same sense of space and light and awareness of God can be found there. As with so many words from the Bible the word ἔρημος “wilderness” can be translated in many ways. In scripture wilderness implies a place where God gives his presence in abundance. That is a key part of our Lenten Journey, finding the space to be aware of God.

Now of course we could interpret wilderness in a spiritual or allegorical sense but sometimes taking things as written is a more helpful approach. The Gospel reading does not tell us a great deal about what Jesus did in the wilderness. We are only told that he fasted and was tempted by the Devil. He fasted for forty days and nights and because he fasted, he was hungry. So, the first temptation was to use his power to provide food for himself. He refused. He needed food and God recognises that we all need the basics of life, but this was not about food, rather the abuse of power and Jesus turned it away pointing to the true use of power.

In the second temptation the Devil took Jesus to the top of the temple, and tried to push him into showing, proving maybe, who he was to the world. 'Jump and the angels will save you. Do you not want everyone to know who you are'. Well, yes, of course Jesus wanted people to know who he was but not in this contrived way. Again, Jesus refused. The Devil was tempting Jesus to use his own position for self-aggrandisement.

The third time the Devil offered Jesus all the power and wealth in the world – all he had to do was forsake God and worship the Devil. Jesus told the devil to get away from him insisting that only God should be worshiped and served. Jesus the most powerful being in the world refused to use his power for his own benefit.

The temptations that Jesus was subjected to by the Devil can seem very far removed from our experience, but Jesus was both human and divine, so there is a human aspect to each of the temptations that Jesus faced.

Jesus's family was not well off, and he was being tempted to abuse his divine power to improve his own lot in life. He refused to take that step but that does not mean it is easy to do that. This is a very real temptation in everyday life and the society we live in. Just imagine if instead of Jesus being tempted it was a human being who could not resist using their power and position for their own benefit. How easy it would be for that person to slide further down the slope as they sought to advance the people nearest to them. In my previous role as a Chartered Accountant, we started to spend considerable time helping younger colleagues learn how to identify and resist pressure from others to carry out illegal or dubious acts. Not because we thought they were unprincipled but because we thought we had a duty to prepare them for the pressures they would undoubtedly face.

The second temptation was self-aggrandisement. We live in a society which peddles that very concept through obsession with celebrities, lifestyle shows, influencers etcetera. Some of it is just harmless fun, or occasionally useful, but it can also be very harmful, particularly to children and younger adults as they compare their own lives to the fantasies they see in social media.

And finally absolute power. In terms of what we have heard in the news over the past weeks, it is clear that there is a real temptation for human beings to think that power or wealth gives one a right to dominate others and sometimes to their severe detriment. Jesus did not walk into this trap but plenty of people do, and some of them cannot understand why it is wrong and self-destructive.

Lent is a time to think about how we recognise temptation in our lives and how we might better respond to it. It arose out of the preparatory period leading to baptism at Easter which was practised by the early church. Candidates for baptism were encouraged to fast and to reflect on the commitment they were about to make in preparation for the momentous change it would bring.

After the reformation, some denominations stopped observing Lent, but for churches like the Scottish Episcopal Church it is a great blessing. Nowadays the restrictions of fasting and the strict rules of the past have gone, but what remains might be more challenging. I still recall the choices of Lent as a child. No sweets! Too much fish! And the absolute horror – here is your pocket money and there is the Lent box for the starving children in Africa! How our perspective has changed. Nowadays we have more flexibility, but this means more accountability. Lent is penitential but it is also a time for spiritual growth.

I was taught by a much wiser person that we should be wary of going down the path of self-inflicted penance. Lent is a season in which we are asked to live simply and be honest with ourselves so that we can better hear God. He

asks us to grow closer to him and that requires us to grow as a human being. Giving up something, carrying out a penitential act contributes to that, as does being honest in front of God, but we can also grow by doing something positive in Lent. That might mean seeking to improve our own behaviour, or praying more, or doing something for others.

Now I said we would come back to the secular view of Lent. It is not uncommon for people without an expressed Christian faith to observe Lent. To me this appears to demonstrate that much in our way of life in the West fails to bring spiritual peace to people. Although this form of Lent without an understanding of God's hope for us primarily resembles wellbeing programmes it is still a step on the pathway to God, and who knows what may come from that.

Perhaps we should think of secular Lent as the Holy Spirit nudging people in the right direction. Possibly one of the things Christians are called to do in Lent is to show the world around us how living in the light of Christ is the greatest act of self-help.