

10th February 2008 Lent One
Rev. Rob Lamerton
Temptations

Readings:

- Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
- Psalm 32
- Romans 5: 12-21
- Matthew 4:1-11

Text of readings is available at <http://divinity.library.vanderbilt.edu/lectionary/ALent/aLent1.htm>

Lent is about accepting God's forgiveness for our sins and deepening our relationship with God!

Ash Wednesday emphasizes the need for sorrow for our sins and genuine repentance expressed in the spiritual disciplines of giving aims (giving to the needy and to God's purposes), prayer and fasting. We often add in there what we call "works of mercy" or doing good deeds!

The temptations Jesus encounters in the wilderness are temptations to live in a way which is different to the way of faith in God and obedience to his commands! They recall the temptations we face every day..

- To doubt God's provision and to look after one's self
- To test God rather than by choosing the harder path of faith.
- The desire to have it all the easy and quick way rather than being willing to discover our true calling as people of God.

On Ash Wednesday we began Lent with the traditional Imposition of Ashes. Ashes as a sign of repentance and turning back to God date back to the Old Testament. Their use grew to be accepted practice in the church 11th and 12th centuries but mostly for those who had been separated from the church and were to be readmitted into the Christian community at Easter. Eventually those who were called "Penitents" and those to be baptized came to be prepared together for the Easter baptismal service!

Originally the time of preparation was only a few days but then a fast of 40 days was initiated following the pattern of Jesus himself and the whole pattern of repentance and the overcoming of temptation in Lent was drawn together.

The purpose was of course to be ready to enter into the new Resurrection life of Christ. To do that of course means first of all to put to death / to kill off / all the aspects of our lives which prevent that! A little like pulling out the weeds to let the plants and flowers grow! OR Reducing the amount of greenhouse gases we produce to create a better future for the planet! So we need to deal with the issues (SIN) which prevents us from growing and entering into the fullness of the life of Christ! And there is that word SIN which really means missing or failing short of the target! So we need to deal with those issues where we continue to fall short!

In our gospel reading today it is easy to just look at the story as it appears on the surface! If we read it more carefully there is much more to be discovered!

So far in this gospel of Matthew he has recorded only one saying of Jesus. The words he said as he discussed his baptism with John the Baptist. "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." I mentioned in my address on 13th January about this reading that the meaning of this may be 'We must do the will of God' or "fulfill the scriptures".

Now a few verses on in today's gospel the next words of Jesus are spoken in response to the devil's testing deceiving questions "If you are the Son of God..." Jesus says "It is written"

So the devil's words relate to the affirmation of God at Jesus baptism "This is my Son" And he tries to instill doubt and deceive. Jesus response is "It is written" confirming that he has come to fulfill all that is written in the Hebrew scriptures!

The three answers Jesus gives are from Deuteronomy and refer to the testing of the children of Israel in the wilderness after they had crossed the Red Sea!

Jesus having been through the water of baptism comes to his testing in the wilderness! Matthew paints a picture of Jesus which parallels the experience of the ancient children of Israel.

In Deuteronomy 8:2 Moses talks to the people about being led into the wilderness to be tested. Similarly Jesus is led by the spirit to fast and be tested 40 days and nights.

Jesus follows a similar path to that of the children of Israel BUT whereas they failed, Jesus wins through and resists the temptation to abandon his calling.

The testing in the wilderness for the people of Israel lies between the crossing of the Red Sea and the giving of the Law on Mt Sinai. For Jesus the testing follows his baptism and the Sermon on the

Mount (his law giving!) Mathew paints that picture all the more that Jesus is the New Israel — the one in whom the old Israel finds fulfillment and the new people of God has its beginning!

Now the wilderness was believed to be the home of the evil spirits! The interpreter's dictionary of the Bible says "The idea is rooted in the peril, eeriness and unpredictability of life in the wilderness". Seeing the movie "No Country for Old Men" reminded me of the scary experience in 1974 of being left in the outback near Barrow Creek. There seemed to me a tension between an amazing sense of God and yet a real scariness!

Now of course the "devil" translates "diabolos" or "satanas". The word means "deceiver" and he is understood to be the singular supernatural adversary of God, and the tempter and seducer of people. Much debate rages over the nature and existence of a personal devil but this description gives some form or shape to the forces which deceive us.

Now even the nature of the temptations is similar to those faced by the Israelites and the way they are presented is designed to produce doubt. To get Jesus to abandon his calling and vocation just as the Israelites were challenged to abandon their calling!

1. The temptation to turn stones into bread recalls Moses words in Deut. 8.3 where he reminds the people in the wilderness about the provision of the manna in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. And it reminds us how we are tempted to doubt the power of God to provide! We may also see it as the temptation to "look after number one" to scrounge and fight for all we can get at the expense of trusting God.
2. The second temptation rises out of Jesus' answer to the first! If God cares for those who are truly God's people then they too will come to no harm whatever, suggests the devil. So let Jesus throw himself down and prove the promises of Psalm 91. The answer is again from Deuteronomy 6.16 "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah" Massah means proof or testing! And recalls the time in Exodus 17.1-7 when the Israelites questioned "Is the Lord among us or not?" Jesus however refuses to put God to the test because he recognizes that the scriptures must be fulfilled "that it must be so" by his own faithfulness NOT by some crazy stunt!
3. The third temptation is to receive authority and possession of the world by worshipping the devil. (in a number of places the devil was seen as having authority). Jesus' response is again from Deuteronomy 6.13-15 and seems to refer to the sin of Israel in making the golden calf (Exodus 32). worshipping another god. Jesus however does not commit Israel's sin and worship other gods! In so doing he he receives through his faithfulness from God all that the

devil falsely promised! At the end of the gospel Jesus is able to say "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me!"

The temptations entice us to live in a way different from the way of faith in God and obedience to his commands (and so we read the 10 commandments in Lent).

1. Doubt God's provision and look after number one!
2. To test god with some crazy stunt rather than the harder path of faith and obedience.
3. To abandon God and our calling as God's children and to try to short circuit the way to God's blessing to worship all the wrong things.

So as we ponder the way we are tempted to abandon our calling as Daughters and Sons of God we also ponder God's forgiveness and the disciplines of giving alms, prayer and fasting as ways of being restored and rasied up as God's children.