

Joint Service for 1st Sunday of Lent

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

have you given anything up for Lent? how is it going? I'm still baffled by the response I got in an assembly once, where a child told me she'd given up cucumber for Lent; what was the relationship between her and cucumber that made that a meaningful thing to do?!

but I wonder anyway whether the focus on 'giving things up' rather misses the point; it treats Lent as a superficial, external discipline, a box to be ticked, rather than the deep and serious thing it should be, if we are truly to follow Jesus into those 40 days of fasting and temptation in the wilderness

we need to take a longer term view than 'can I get through these next six weeks without any chocolate or alcohol?', or even, 'will I manage to read all those improving books or spend that extra half hour in prayer every day?'

Jesus' days in the desert are more than a test to pass at the start of his ministry; the 'temptations' are more than puzzles to be solved, or dangers to escape in a computer fantasy game, before you can progress to the next level

in fact the word 'temptation' is not really a helpful translation; the Greek words used here have more the sense of 'test' or 'trial'; 'temptation' suggests simply there's something 'wrong' to be avoided; but these 'tests' ask deep questions of Jesus' purpose and resolve: how will he fulfil his vocation as the Son of God? not so much, how to avoid doing wrong, as how to do right?

previously, in Luke 3, Jesus is baptised and the Father's voice announces, 'this is my Son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased'; then follows Luke's version of the genealogy of Jesus, which, interestingly, runs *backwards* (unlike Matthew's) to arrive at 'Adam the son of God'; in these two ways Jesus is affirmed as God's Son

now, filled with the Holy Spirit, and led by the Spirit, Jesus heads away from civilisation for those 40 days of solitude; again this is not simply a rite of passage to be survived, in an 'I'm a celebrity, get me out of here' kind of way

for Jesus this time alone is an essential time of preparation for his ministry, which begins with him announcing in the synagogue at Nazareth that 'the Spirit of the Lord is upon me'; where did that assurance of his vocation come from, but out of this time of 'testing' in the wilderness?

and when we look at Jesus' 'temptations' we must keep in mind that they are specific to his vocation as the Son of God, the one sent 'to proclaim good news to poor, release to the captives' and so on

they're simply not in the same category as the temptation for us to eat a chocolate or drink a glass of wine, when we've given them up for Lent; so perhaps we too need to ask deeper questions of ourselves: what tests or trials do we face, that are specific to God's call on our lives? I will return to that towards the end

as we look now at those three temptations or tests of Jesus, there are parallels with the experience of the Israelites, with their 40 years wandering in the desert and their arrival in the Promised Land; they failed the test of their vocation to be the people of God in so many ways; how will this Son of God, Jesus, fare?

Turn Stones into Bread: think how the people complained in the wilderness, how bored they were with the mysterious manna that arrived every morning; ‘give us meat!’ they cried, ‘where are the melons, garlic and cucumbers we enjoyed back in Egypt?’; so the devil says to Jesus, ‘you’re the Son of God; you’re famished; why not make yourself something to eat?’ yes, Jesus is the Son of God, with the power to do such things; but is he to express that vocation by satisfying his own physical needs? bread is fine, but there are more important things: we need to learn that we ‘are not to live on bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord’

Claim the Kingdoms of the World: the Israelites were promised ‘a land flowing with milk and honey’, but that promise rested on their faithful and obedient worship of the God who gave it to them; the Old Testament is the story of their failure to keep their side of that covenant, by turning from the true God and worshipping idols

today’s OT reading, from Deut 26, is a reminder of Israel’s vocation as God’s people, that is to be lived out in worship and thanksgiving; they’re to remember where they’ve come from and all that God has done for them; they forgot that so often, how will Jesus get on?

the devil offers Jesus the entire world, but he knows his inheritance of the kingdom must rest on faithfulness and obedience as Son of God; it’s only in maintaining that close relationship with his Father that he can fulfil his destiny; so he replies, ‘worship the Lord your God and serve only him’

Throw Yourself off the Temple Roof: Satan can quote scripture too, words from Psalm 91 that promise protection to God’s people; recall how the people of Isaiah’s time presumed on that protection: ‘we have the temple of the Lord here in Jerusalem, no harm can come to us!’; how wrong they were about that!

the temptation here is to test God himself, like a child testing the limits of a parent’s patience and love: will God still protect us if we do this? or this? or this? pushing the boundaries! again, no, that is not the kind of Son Jesus will be; only a foundation of obedient trust will take him through the Garden of Gethsemane and on to the cross

in those 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus does not simply ‘pass the test’, avoid the dangers, or give the right answers; he comes away with a clear understanding of his calling as God’s Son, and how that is to be fulfilled

for us then Lent is a time not simply to show we can keep resolutions about food, drink, TV, reading or even prayer; it’s a time to renew our sense of vocation, and to notice and resist all that deflects us from it

one way could be to reflect on our call in our Mission Action Plan, to be a Christ-like church, and Christ-like Christians, to be Contemplative, Compassionate and Courageous; those are useful reference points, both as a check on how we do things, and as drivers for what we seek to do

but what about the specifics of our individual vocation? we may think of ‘vocation’ as applying only to vicars, nuns and missionaries; but the truth is that we are all *called*, to follow Jesus; and we are all *sent*, to speak his words and act in his name

this Lent let’s both examine our present situation, and look forward to what might be; let’s think of Lent not as a test to be passed, like an exam or driving test, but rather as an audition or try-out that may lead to a part in a play or a place in a sports team; or, if you like that kind of thing, Lent is another round of Dancing on Ice / Master Chef / Bake Off / Britain’s Got Talent – a time for skills to be tested and honed in preparation for the next step, the next challenge

there followed short interviews with Josh Cleaver and Jess Horsfall about their sense of vocation, as missionary and novice nun: how have you been tested along the way? what temptations have there been to divert from God’s way for you?

Josh – ‘there are two that I have noticed: the temptation to do some *good* thing, which is not the *right* thing for you at the time; and the temptation to measure your *success* in some way’

Jess – ‘there is the same temptation to look for *success*, for example, in your prayer life; and the temptation to think that it all depends on *you*, rather than on God’

what about us? we don’t have to travel abroad or join a religious community, in order to engage with the tests God has for us; our vocation may be as parent or carer, teacher or student, neighbour or friend, preacher of sermons or maker of teas and coffees; our testing may be as much in everyday decisions, as in moments of crisis

the challenge Lent poses is, how am I fulfilling my calling? what kind of person am I becoming, through the choices I make day to day? that might mean abstaining from chocs, booze, or even cucumber; it might mean setting targets for prayer or reading; but those will only have value when they are part of that larger question: who am I called to be? how am I to follow Christ in all that I do?

my Lent discipline this year? I want to take time to talk to people about their ‘vocation’, to encourage them on the way; any takers for a chat? talk to me!

finally, in case it feels as though we’re being left to make our own way in this, those words from Romans 10 remind us of God’s faithfulness to us: ‘no one who believes in him will be put to shame; everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’