

## FARNHAM PARISH CHURCH

Church and Community

Bible Readings: Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

Date: 10 March 2019

Theme: Temptation and what to do with it

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Only last week we were talking together about the Transfiguration. About that time when Jesus took his three closest friends and spent time with them on a mountain. Mount Tabor, as it is now known, is an exciting place to visit. You gain access to the top in a fleet of taxis. The drivers are hugely experienced, of course, but the speed at which they take the hairpin bends and the corners is really frightening.

From the top you get a wonderful view of a fertile valley and hills in the distance stretching out for miles. It is both wonderful and inspiring all at the same time. And when you think the extraordinary event of Jesus being met by Moses and Elijah as a revelation to Peter, James and John as to who Jesus really was and is, it takes your breath away.

The Mount of Temptation in the story from Luke 4 today is a quite different kind of a place. It is in the desert where nothing much grows and where, for miles and miles, in whichever direction you look, the landscape is bleak and barren and bare. As a pilgrim visitor, you can begin to imagine it easily as a place of testing, of isolation and loneliness and of fear.

This is the context in which Luke sets this encounter between Jesus and the devil. In the previous chapter Jesus has been identified by his cousin, John, as the one who was to come ...

*'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*

He has been confirmed by his heavenly Father as the messiah, the holy one:

*when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'*

Identified by John, confirmed by his heavenly Father, and if that weren't enough, Luke then goes on to authenticate him, by giving us a comprehensive genealogy of the ancestry of Jesus going back as far as Seth, Adam and as God himself.

Jesus is the real deal. He is the business. If we were looking for good credentials, the best credentials, Jesus has it all. If we were looking for someone reliable, here he is. If we were looking for someone we can trust, here he is. If we were looking for someone who would show us how to love, show us how to live, show us how to serve, here he is.

Our new Vision Statement or strapline – Loving God, Living Faith, Serving Community, is a simple but complete description of who Jesus is and who we want to be if we are his followers.

Identified. Confirmed. Authenticated ... and now here in chapter 4 we see he is tested.

Luke tells us Jesus is tested in the context of the wilderness. He is tested right at the start of his ministry. Just when things were looking so good and so positive and so promising, Jesus is tested to the limit by the devil ... whose main job is to distract, to deceive and to deflect. We, too, need to be very wary of him and of his tricks.

The framework for the testing and temptation is the same in each of the three instances in which it comes up.

The devil whispers words of doubt and deceit into Jesus' ear.

Jesus hears this for what it really is.

Jesus responds with the powerful word of scripture.

In a moment we will look at each in turn, but notice that Luke tells us that it is for forty days and forty nights already that Jesus has been tempted by the devil – and we know nothing of those temptations. For forty days and forty nights he has eaten nothing and has become famished.

Only then do we read the detail of these three specific temptations. When he is weary, beaten, battered, bruised and maybe beside himself with pain and anguish, then the

devil sticks the boot in. It's brutal and heavy stuff. Kick a man when he's down, why don't you?

Verse 3:

*<sup>3</sup> The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.'*

Being identified, confirmed and authenticated sounds like it should be enough. But that whisper, that question, that subtle undermining can really hurt. And that little word "If ..." twists the knife.

Of course, Jesus is the Son of God. Of course, he can turn a stone into a loaf of bread and satisfy his hunger. But his calling as God's Son is not to be a conjurer, a worker of magic tricks. His calling as the Christ, the Messiah is to sacrifice and to suffering.

And Jesus replies to the taunt

*<sup>4</sup> Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone."'*

Jesus will not be distracted.

We may all have heard of the syndrome called "imposter syndrome." Statesmen have it, sporting stars have it, musical geniuses have it, gifted academics have it, prominent church leaders have it. There must have been some mistake. This cannot be right. I am in the wrong

place or the wrong job or the wrong position. Someone is having a laugh.

The pain of the undermining word at a time of weakness, is a powerful thing. And yet, the word of God, scripture, God himself speaking, is more powerful and puts the devil in his place.

I am bigger than this, says Jesus. I am here for more than this, says Jesus. There is a wider horizon, a greater game at stake here, and much more to play for.

The next temptation appeals to a different part of Jesus' weakened state:

*<sup>5</sup> Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.'*

Here the devil uses deceit ... he makes out that he has glory and authority to give. He is putting himself in the place of God. He is striking at the heart of the Father-Son relationship. He is asserting a control over Jesus, a pressure for Jesus to worship him, the reward for which will be the kingdoms of the world, which belong to God alone.

It's all a lie.

I don't know whether you watch "Would I lie to you?" We find it very funny indeed. Each panellist has a card on

which is written a short statement relating to something they have done at some point in the past. The other team has to guess whether it's true or it's a lie. Some of the statements are hilarious and, of course, sometimes, the most unlikely thing, the most bizarre sets of facts, the most incredible of stories, turns out to be true. And sometimes, the most plausible sounding possible thing turns out to be a complete fabrication, a total lie.

The devil is calling black is white and white is black. He is claiming an authority which he might desire but can have no hope of ever having. God is God and however much the devil may suggest otherwise, might desire things to be different, might present a convincing case, he is a conquered foe, and God alone is sovereign. Jesus alone is Lord.

Again, in the face of this onslaught, in verse 8

*<sup>8</sup> Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."'*

There is only one God, the Lord and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Listening too much to the deceit of the world which denies or seeks to dethrone him, ultimately does us no good at all.

Jesus will not be deceived.

And finally, the next temptation as the temperature rises and the pressure mounts in v9:

*<sup>9</sup> Then the devil<sup>[c]</sup> 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, <sup>10</sup> for it is written,  
"He will command his angels concerning you,  
to protect you",  
<sup>11</sup> and  
"On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."*

Here, Luke tells us, the devil takes Jesus to the high point of the temple and encourages him to give up his life. From this point Jesus is to jump ... but he will be safe and saved by God's ministering angels.

"They will protect", he whispers. "They will bear you up."

We have seen distraction and deception. Here the temptation is for Jesus to be deflected from his primary purpose in coming to earth. To live to show us how to live and to die to offer us freedom and forgiveness. Jumping into the unknow and being saved is absolutely not what his mission is all about. Jesus was born to die – not born to be rescued from death.

The disciples, of course, would find this hard to accept. Time and again Jesus told them that he would be put to death and on the third day rise again. Time and again they didn't hear this or didn't understand this or didn't want to

hear this. Their idea at times, was rather to follow a conquering hero than a man heading for martyrdom. Who knows, they might be next!

But Jesus is resolute. Luke tells us at the turning point in his gospel in chapter 19:28:

He set his face towards Jerusalem ...

Jerusalem was to be the place of sacrifice not of some kind of spectacular and futile aerial stunt or gimmick.

And Jesus counters this crazy counterfeit idea with these words in v12:

*<sup>12</sup> Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."*

In the same way that he himself later rebuked Peter for suggesting there might be an easier way out, here he rebukes the devil with the simple reminder that God's ways are higher than our ways and his thoughts than our thoughts. We may not always fully understand what he is doing, but his plan is perfect and sufficient and good.

Two final thoughts for us this Lent ... v13 says this

*<sup>13</sup> When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*

In our services on Ash Wednesday in the morning here and in the evening at The Spire, we were reminded that we are beginning a journey. We, too, are travelling the forty days and forty nights to the events of Palm Sunday Holy Week and Easter. And it's in that week in particular that we see the devil return to try to do his worst, as the crowd turns from Hosanna to crucify, the disciples flee for their lives and all turns dark at the cross.

We may wonder what to do in Lent. There are small groups to join. We are following a course together called Faith on the Front Line. It's a course looking at what it means to follow Jesus in the ordinary and the everyday. We will look at the bible together there to see what we can learn about daily offering of ourselves to God to make of us what he will and to use us as he can. The groups are meeting on different days and different times. We would love you to sign up and to plan to join us.

It will be a reminder of the power of God's word in our lives. Just as we see Jesus using scripture to combat the temptation to be distracted, deceived or deflected. And maybe, we too will find that the Bible has a new meaning for us, a new power in our lives, a new influence in our thinking and acting.

John Stott, one of the finest of the popular biblical scholars, a vicar in central London for many years, says this:

*'In so far as the Bible is a human book, we read it as we would any other book, with our minds; but in so far as it is*

*the word of God, we read it as we would read no other book, on our knees.'*

Someone else has said:

*"Principles of interpreting the Bible are, perhaps, the equivalent of the proper use of the operating manual.*

*Reading and studying the Bible is a uniquely satisfying experience. Engaging not only the mind but also the heart, it speaks, from God, into our world and into our individual lives".*

Someone else again has said:

*"The teaching of the Bible is our guidebook for living. Its doctrines have inescapable implications, the ethical instruction that flows from them. That ethical instruction is inevitably embedded in the cultures into which it was given, but the principles it embodies are for all time and all cultures."*

And at a time in world history and the history of our country, when it seems, sometimes, we don't know which way to turn – as well as when we face temptation ourselves of one kind and another – focussing again on the power and importance of scripture could be very timely indeed.

Let's pray ...