

## 6<sup>th</sup> March 2022 – First Sunday of Lent

Welcome to the first Sunday of Lent. For many of you perhaps just the latest of many Lents in your life and for others perhaps the first time you have kept a holy Lent. The liturgical year, like the seasons, is circular. Every year as we revisit the season, however old we are, we come to it afresh because we have changed over the year. The path to heaven, Jacob's ladder, which he sees in a dream in Genesis 28 is usually pictured as a ladder with angels going up into heaven. You can see it on the sculptured West End of Bath Abbey. But William Blake depicts Jacob's ladder as a spiral staircase. As we spiral upwards to heaven we can look down on the places where we have already travelled. I'd like to take that image with us as we look at Jesus' temptations in the wilderness.

'If' you are the Son of God, the voice in his head sneers. At this stage in his ministry, he hasn't yet completely formed an understanding of who he is. Later in his ministry his mother and brothers will believe him to be mad. With his mental strength diminished by fasting and physical exhaustion it would be understandable to question his sanity and identity. 'If you are the son of God,' the voice says, 'prove it to yourself. Turn stones into bread.' But he doesn't do it. He will not use his Godly power to overcome his own doubts, just as later in his ministry he will refuse to give a sign to the crowds who, having heard about the miraculous feeding of the five thousand, clamour 'Give us a sign!' (John 6.30). He doesn't.

Although later the writer of John's Gospels recognised them as signs of divinity, his miracles were not done to convince himself or others. Instead, they were always in line with kingdom values: celebrating the joy of the kingdom at the marriage of Cana; healing the blind, deaf, dumb and lame; feeding the hungry; calming the seas; raising the dead. His miracles demonstrated abundant life replacing death; health replacing sickness and disability; order replacing the chaos of the storm.

Is it shocking to suggest that Jesus himself, the second person of the Trinity, could have been tempted to doubt? If we are honest, I think we know that we all live with doubt, as we live with love and loss and pain. In his humanity Jesus was fully human and shared this. As bombs fall in Eastern Europe we ask where is God? If we pretend to have no doubt, it leads to apparent confidence and success but honest doubt leads to humility, gentleness and truth. Of course, Jesus resists the temptation.

He is also tempted with power and here the tempter was subtler. He was offered total earthly authority to do good as ruler of the world. Again, that temptation may have been aimed at an inner question, 'How much earthly power, if any, was he to accept in order to bring in the kingdom?' His answer was uncompromising. He would accept no power except from God - 'Worship the Lord your God' he quoted, 'And serve him only.' In his earthly ministry Jesus' commitment to the will of the Father never faltered. Even in the Garden of Gethsemane he admitted his fear but prayed, 'Nevertheless not my will but yours.'

The temptation to seek power in order to do good is a dangerous one. We are easily deceived. One explanation of President Putin's invasion of Ukraine is that he is inspired by faith to re-unite Russia with Belarus and Ukraine to re-create 'Holy

Mother Russia'. He sees his actions as benign, approved by God. Tragically for himself and the world he is wrong. The power of violence, tanks and bombs cannot come from God. But there may be something to learn from this appalling violence and tragedy. Ukraine has suffered in war before and Ukrainians bring to it a new understanding of how to respond to war. Did you see film of the women of Ukraine interacting with captured Russian soldiers? They were offering them mobile phones to call home and telling their mothers, 'Come to Ukraine and you can take your boys home.' Ukraine has learnt and changed since the last time it was at war.

The temptations on the desert are about more than Jesus discovering his identity and his mission. After they are finished we are read, 'The enemy departed until an opportune time.' That time comes round again when Peter says to Jesus, 'Suffering and death must never happen to you!' and Jesus recognises the tempter as he responds, 'Get behind me Satan.' One more time in Holy Week in the Garden of Gethsemane we read of Jesus tempted by fear to give up his divine destiny. He resists.

As it was for Jesus, so it is for us. As Lent returns and we are a year older, so do temptations. They may be the same but we are different, we have learnt and grown. If we are keeping faithfully to the path set before us, then even though temptations are perennial, our confidence in God grows that God will keep us safe in the time of trial. And we realise that the circle of the seasons, the circle of our lives is not just a circle but a spiral in which we move closer to God as we learn from Jesus to deal with our own temptations to inappropriate power, or doubt, or fear.

During the Second World War, as his own country behaved as a warmongering aggressor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote of the 'Ground giving way under one's feet' and asked, 'Who stands firm?' As over the past few days the firm ground of our assumptions of normality and civilisation seems to be giving way under us and as Europe experiences a paradigm shift we are to stand firm. Fear and panic are insidious. They are temptations to be faced down by prayer and humility. And our response to one who claims to have earthly power must be that the ruler of the world is not the one with the most weapons. As Jesus responded to the power of evil, so do we saying, 'Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.'