

LENT COURSE OF SERMONS
‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test’
Lent 2
24 February 2018

This is the second Sunday that Fr. Nicholas and I are focusing on the three temptations that Jesus suffered in his wilderness testing.

Immediately after his baptism, Jesus is driven by the spirit into the blasted Wild lands east of the Jordan; suffering extremes of heat and cold, loneliness and, at the end of a 40 day fast, ravening hunger. It was an experience that reduces a human being to his or her bare essentials, stripping away the comforts of an identity provided by nationality, family, education, status, and physical power. There is only sound of the endless wind, and the whisper of the internal voice; and the testing.

Though Mark’s account of the time is bare, Matthew and Luke both give more details of Jesus’ testing, and as these details can only have come from Jesus himself, they give us a precious insight into his own inner life. And this week, we come to the second of those tests; ‘the test of the vision of the Temple.’

How we read the source of Jesus’ temptation – whether from an external source of evil, or from his own fully human nature – is not greatly important. What is important, is the voice he heard:

“Then the devil took him to the holy city, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will give his angels charge of you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'"

The temptation is a subtle one, and it contains three barbs. The first is contained in the ‘If’; ‘If you are the son of God - and the Temptation before Jesus is to put the Father in a position where God would either have to intercede miraculously to save his Son’s Messiahship, or see his saving intervention in humanity’s history fail disastrously. It is an appeal to doubt, and after those 40 days, doubt in some measure, there must have been.

The second part of the temptation is not to doubt, but to fear, and it is contained in the Tempter’s quotation from Psalm 91 “He will give his angels charge of you,” and “On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone”.; In Jesus’ time, and indeed now among devout Jews, to quote from part of a Psalm was to quote from all of it; and Psalm 91 has in it these words:

“He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, who abides in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the LORD, ‘My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.’ For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand; but it will not come near you.”

‘It will not come near you’; Jesus’ temptation was to use his power to become invulnerable; an invulnerable Messiah, with no need to fear, with no need for pain or sacrifice.

And finally, in this most complex of temptations, there is the temptation to domination through magic. Imagine the scene; a man is spied at the very pinnacle of the Temple, one of

the highest buildings in the near east; the crowd gathers; what will he do? Will he jump, will he die? And in front of the Masters of Jerusalem, gathered and breathless, he floats to earth, as if on angels' wings. What room can there be for doubt? This is Messiah!

But there has to be room for doubt. God is not a magician, and we are not robots. They had to make up their own minds.

What those three parts to this temptation had in common, was that they all appealed to a lack of trust; trust that he was called to do what he believed; and that even if he suffered to do it, he was contained and held in his Father's love. Had he given in, his Messiahship would have been fatally flawed and undermined – by his own uncertainty, and by a reliance on showmanship. He did not give in. He embraced the challenge, and accepted the need to remain vulnerable, to remain at risk in facing it. 'You shall put the Lord your God to the test'.

And that is where his experience in the wild lands and ours in South East London join. For we are tempted not to trust in God's purpose for us, as well, and we are tempted to want our life as Christians to be an invulnerable cake walk, without either hurt or the need for sacrifice. But trust and vulnerability are both absolutely essential to living life as a Christian. Without trust, there is no relationship; no relationship between a child and its parent, between a wife and a husband, between our God and ourselves. In trust we reach out; in trust we are held. And trust means vulnerability; for our lives as Christians will demand from us that we stretch out on a limb in this world for the one we trust in; that we accept and embrace the fact that in doing so, we may be hurt. Anything else is just to lock ourselves in a bunker, and pray that nothing affects us – and so, infallibly, we will not affect the world for good; and affecting the world for good is what it's all about.

Like Jesus in the wild lands, we have, each of us, to believe that we are sent; that we have a purpose in God's plan, and that we will work with all our power to fulfil it, even to our own cost, and that we can do that because we are held in love. There's no other way, for him as Messiah, for us as his followers. The God who loves and holds us, give us the strength to do that, now and always.