

SERMON FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT – YEAR A

Heavenly Father, give us faith to receive your word, understanding to know what it means, and the will to put it into practice; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The people of the ancient world held very firm beliefs in a spirit world which rules people's lives in many different, both for good and for evil. Modern people aren't so different from ancient people really. One of my grandmothers was a very superstitious person. It went so far that if she put on any piece of clothing inside out, she would refuse to put it on the right way, and would either wear the inside out garment for the rest of the day or put a new one on. We also see this belief system continue through to our time in things such as chains with symbols to ward off evil spirits.

At his baptism, when the voice of God proclaimed Jesus to be God's son, it would have been thought that the spirits would have heard this, and the bad spirits would seek to test Jesus to see whether he was indeed worthy to be called God's Son.

It's therefore no surprise that the very next scene in Matthew's gospel after Jesus' baptism is his temptation in the wilderness. The Holy Spirit, the best spirit, led Jesus into the wilderness, where he was tested by the worst spirit, the devil.

He is given three names in Matthew's account, the Devil, Satan, and 'The Tempter'. The Greek word for 'Devil' is 'diabolos' from which we get the word diabolical. The Greek word means "slanderer" or 'liar'. The Greek word for Satan, 'Satanas' is from the Hebrew word for "adversary." So the Devil or Satan, is an adversary who tells lies to tempt us into doing something that is not good for us, or for others.

The devil does this in the story of The Fall from our first reading from the book of Genesis. Adam and Eve were told by the serpent that something God had told them – that if they eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would die – is not true. It is suggested to them that because of this, God is not trustworthy, that there are things God is keeping from them, and so they are tempted to do something which is not good for the whole human race.

In the first temptation of Jesus, the devil asks Jesus to change stones into loaves of bread. Since one loaf would have been more than enough for Jesus, the temptation is not only for Jesus to use his power to satisfy his hunger, but also to use his power to provide food for a lot of people, to meet an undeniable need. Feeding the hungry was an expected role of the Messiah and would have made Jesus very popular.

Jesus answers by quoting a verse that asserts his own humanity. 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. Jesus is saying that he will not use his divine power but will trust God like all humans should.

In the second temptation, the devil responds to Jesus' stress on the importance of following God's word. This temptation doesn't take place in the wilderness, but at the temple. This is almost likely because the temple was the central place of worship in the Jewish faith.

I've met a not insignificant number of people who have had a disease or disability who have been told by a well-meaning Christian, "If you only had enough faith, God would hear your prayer and would heal you." The problem with this view is that rather than living by the Word of God, we can seek to have God act according to our word.

Jesus' response is from Deuteronomy 6:16, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' The entire verse reads: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah." The Israelites tested God at Massah in the book of Exodus, where "... Moses called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the LORD, saying, 'Is the LORD among us or not?'"

So the second "test" was about questioning God's presence among us. How do we know the Lord is among us? Because the Lord has promised he is among us. What we need to do is to trust in God's promise.

The third temptation is on a high mountain, which was also used to describe where the transfiguration of Jesus took place in last week's gospel.

The American Lutheran Pastor and writer, Paul Bosch, who died last week, once wrote, is numerical growth an inherent good? Could it be that some growth is achieved at too high a cost: at the expense of faithfulness to the gospel and its welcome of diversity? Jesus, after all, did not urge 'success' on his followers; he urged faithfulness."

Is the church's need to have larger congregations and more money in the plate about faithfulness to God, or about being successful in the eyes of the world? Mind you, is a church's lack of growth a sign that it is not being faithful to God, but faithful to itself?

At issue here is the question, "To whom does the world belong?" If Jesus accepts the devil's offer, he recognises the devil's power and authority.

Jesus' response is almost a quote from Deuteronomy 6:13: "The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear."

So what does Jesus' temptation story mean for us as we begin our Lenten journey this year? I would suggest that the temptation of Jesus gives us an opportunity to follow Jesus in trusting God. There are so many temptations in this world, most of them coming not as forbidden fruit hanging from a tree but rather in the form of cunning messaging that tell us that we aren't enough, or that we need to trust in someone who speaks smooth and flattering words, but who is ultimately deceiving us. In the face of the tempting sounds we hear and images we see, we have the opportunity to hear the same voice which came to Jesus at his own baptism, and which helped him to deal with the temptations put before him. This is the voice that reminds us that we too are God's beloved children and because of that we can live in trust and not fear.