

Today's gospel reading is one of those passages which I think I am guilty of reading as a story about Jesus, which helps me to discover more of his character and relationship with God, without thinking about its impact on my life today. I don't really stop to consider why it is included in two gospels or the fact that Jesus must have told his followers about this experience for a reason, because no one else was there with him and if he hadn't therefore, it wouldn't be included in the bible today. I suppose I don't really want to think about forces of evil in the world and whether the Devil actually exists and would rather focus on resurrection, salvation and new life.

However, if temptation is defined as anything which gets in the way of growing in relationship with God, then if I ignore this passage, I am forgetting that we are all tempted daily, and if you are anything like me, most days even if only in small ways, I give into that temptation. When I come to this passage through that lens, then I can see how relevant it is to me this Lent as I journey towards ordination, and I hope that you too will see its relevance to your lives as it is such an important piece of the jigsaw of God's salvation plan, being vital for our understanding of the gospel and an essential component of our discipleship training manual!

In Luke's gospel, the story is recorded just after Jesus' baptism where God has revealed to all around that Jesus is his beloved son. He is full of the Holy Spirit and ready to begin his ministry wherever the Spirit leads him. And where does the spirit lead him – into the wilderness. Yes you heard correctly – it is the spirit that leads him into the wilderness – he is not there by chance or because he has decided himself to go there, but because the spirit intentionally led him there.

We are not told why, but maybe it was necessary for Jesus to prepare for his ministry away from the distractions of the world, by spending time with his Father (interestingly, a 3 day retreat is a prerequisite of ordination, enabling us as ordinands to prepare for the next step of our journey in the presence of God). Maybe it was to show Satan who was in charge and that the time had come to reverse the curse of death, which was the result of the first recorded temptation in the garden of Eden when the world had been separated from God, that we recall when signed with the cross in ash, 'you are dust, and to dust you shall return.'

The fact that He is in the wilderness for 40 days, reflects the 40 years which the Israelites spent in the desert after God rescued them from Egypt. Despite being rescued however, they spent the time giving into the temptation to grumble and complain, questioning why God was making the journey so difficult, complaining about the quality of the food, demanding water, even at times wishing that they were back in Egypt. And yet, throughout it all God provided for them and didn't give up on them.

Now Jesus is alone in the wilderness, knowing that he has come into the world to save it, to be the new Adam, to enable everyone to come to the promised land and have life in all its fulness, and here he is experiencing the same temptations as the Israelites, and in addition having no food and yet, he resists the temptations and begins his work of overcoming The Devil, a work which will be completed on the cross, bringing salvation to all. As the writer to the Hebrews says, He was in all points tempted as we are, and yet was without sin.

So how did he do it?

When we look at the gospel reading, I think there are three key things to notice.

Firstly – Jesus was filled with the spirit as we saw at his baptism.

Secondly - he lived a life of worship, fasting and praying

And thirdly – he used the word of God and didn't try to argue against the temptation. He came right back at The Devil with the words, 'It is written'.

The temptations Jesus faced were all specific to him and yet, on closer examination, they are the same temptations that we face today because they got to heart of who he was, and just as they do for us, and did from Adam and Eve, came from within. All The Devil did to Jesus was say, if you are who you say you are then why don't you... This is what he did to Adam and Eve, saying if God put you in charge, then why can't you ...

And isn't this what happens to us, doesn't The Devil use our self-doubts making us think God doesn't care about us, telling us that we deserve to be happy. Doesn't he cause us to question who we are, making us forget that we are children of God, filled with the same spirit as Jesus?

Doesn't he encourage us to be self-indulgent, telling us that one more glass of wine won't hurt, or being 5 minutes late won't matter or perhaps at the moment thinking only of how the war in the Ukraine is putting up petrol prices rather than considering ways we can help those whose lives are falling apart?

Doesn't he push us to get ourselves noticed and to boast about our achievements, or agree with us that we deserve the latest gadget or fashion item in order so that we take our focus off God?

So if our temptations are the same, how do we become more like Jesus in overcoming them?

Firstly, we need to be confident in the fact that Jesus has completed the work of defeating The Devil by his death and resurrection and has reconciled each one of us to God. As Paul tells us in our Romans reading, 'If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.' This won't stop us being tempted but does mean that if we ask God to help us, he will. As the Message version of verse 9 says, "You are not doing anything, you're simply calling out to God and trusting him to do it. That's salvation."

Secondly, we need to get to know the bible better so that we can use it effectively in our daily lives to speak truth rather than engaging in a dialogue with the thoughts that The Devil plants in our minds. One way to do this, is to join the Lent group on a Tuesday evening and if you want to know more about it, talk to Andrew at the end of the service.

Finally, we need to spend time alone with God, praying and getting to know him better, spending time listening to him and asking for his help.

Here Jesus gave us an invaluable tool - the Lord's prayer. He taught his disciples this prayer after his temptation experience, and if we look at it closely, we can see that it holds all the keys that we need to help us to learn how to overcome temptation.

By beginning the prayer with the words, Our Father, we are affirmed as children of God, and then we are urged to worship God and pray for his kingdom to come and for his will to be done. When we are worshipping God, we are less likely to worship other things and more likely to inhabit kingdom values in our lives.

As we pray, give us this day our daily bread, we recognise that God provides for all our needs, just as he provided manna in the desert - and that he will sustain us, so we don't need to go looking for stones!

By asking for our sins to be forgiven and, for help to forgive others, we are humbling ourselves before God and not allowing pride to take root in our lives.

And then here is the crux, we ask not to be led into temptation and to be delivered from the evil one. Jesus knew how hard it was for him and therefore He encourages us to ask for protection so that when we hear the voice of The Devil we ignore it and listen instead for the voice of God.

Finally, we are reminded that the kingdom, the power and the glory belong to God because The Devil has been defeated and all of creation has been reconciled to God.

So to end, I would like to pose a Lent challenge. Will you commit with me to praying the Lord's prayer every morning when you wake up for the remainder of Lent, and as we do so, think about what it teaches us about overcoming the temptation we will face that day, listening for the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Then, when we gather together to celebrate on Easter Sunday, we will be ready to confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord and be prepared to follow wherever the spirit leads.