

God's word God's way

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, St James March 5th 2017

Keynote Bible passages: Matthew 4.1 – 11, Genesis 2.15 – 17, 3.1 – 7

- 1) Traditionally the gospel of the first Sunday in Lent focuses on the temptations Jesus experienced at the start of his earthly ministry. We note that this must have been in God's purpose for Jesus as Matthew tells us he was 'led by the Spirit' into the wilderness. Through those 40 days Jesus encountered the reality of alternatives. I understand it as the freedom of choice given him as he determined what was to be the God-given way he would bring God's purposes. Thus he was presented with possibilities - of magic turning stones into bread, of a high-flying miracle if he would worship an alternative, and recognising authority other than of his heavenly Father. Note that each time Jesus rejects the alternative options he quotes Scripture, God's word. Hence the title of my sermon 'God word God's way.' Jesus was clear about his obedience to the Father, and that's how it would be in his earthly ministry. We note that Jesus resisted these, and other temptations as Luke says he 'was tempted in every way.' Jesus' focus was on serving his heavenly Father. There were other times Jesus was presented with alternatives and thus we have the powerful prayer when he was in the Garden of Gethsemane prior to his arrest. Jesus prays that the cup (of suffering) would pass from him, and then says 'not my will but yours be done.'

- 2) The temptations have relevance for the Christian believer in that we also experience these. I'm mindful of a relevant phrase in the Lord's Prayer where there are alternatives in common use. The more 'traditional' prayer to the Father has been 'Lead us not into temptation. And the second in the contemporary 'Save us from the time of trial.' Each is worthy of consideration. The first is based on the description of '*the Spirit* led Jesus into the wilderness' One concludes it was in the Father's purpose that Jesus had to experience temptations in determining how it would be to follow God's will. One writer begins: 'He learned obedience.....' The thought may be that we likewise in determining to follow in God's way are also exposed to alternative possibilities. Such is a real experience as I'm sure you as have I been offered alternatives in which we are tempted. The prayer then would suggest such be minimalised.

The second and more current use is to pray the Father to 'Save us from the time of trial'. No one of us wants these either. Yet they do occur in our lives and of loved ones. Prolonged health conditions would be such an example. There can be positives which do come as people's love is extended when such trials occur. This aspect would focus less on temptations and more on that extended time Jesus spent in the wilderness, and the positives that came from this, including reliance on the power of scripture. 'We do not live by bread alone but *by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*'

3) How then might we be guided in *overcoming temptations* when we encounter such? They are not something we like to happen but they do. At times I've wondered how did it happen? Hence I'm mindful of St Paul in his dilemma: 'I do not understand what I do; for I don't do what I would like to do, but instead I do what I hate. I know that good does not live in me, that is, in my human nature. For even though the desire to do good is in me, I am not able to do it. I don't do the good I want to do; instead I do the evil I don't want to do. If I do what I don't want to do, this means I am no longer the one who does it; instead it is the sin that lives in me.' (Romans 7.15 -20).

You will recognise these words as St Paul wrestled with his inner motivation to do good yet there came that which is not good. It may be we could add it is not only in the doing, it can also be in words. Words come out of our lips that can hurt others.

How then for us?

Firstly to hold *close to our faith*. There's helpful counsel from the writer to the Hebrews: 'Let us hold firmly to the faith we possess. For we have a great high priest who has gone into the very presence of God – Jesus the Son of God. Our high priest is not one who cannot feel sympathy for our weaknesses. On the contrary we have a high priest who was tempted in every way as we are, but did not sin. Let us have confidence then, and approach God's throne, where there is grace. There we will find mercy and grace to help us just when we need it. (Heb 4.15).

Secondly – *prayer*. As I was preparing this sermon and seeking God's guidance, words from a hymn came to mind. May I read them, as they offer guidance and are a prayer:

'Be thou my guardian and my guide and hear me when I call; Let not my slippery footsteps slide and hold me lest I fall.

And if I tempted am to sin and outward things are strong, do thou O Lord keep watch within and save my soul from wrong.

Still let me ever watch and pray and feel that I am frail; that if the tempter cross my way yet he may not prevail.'

Thirdly, in *decision making*, when alternatives are placed in our way, be they temptation or a where there's choice, to try to seek how it might be in *God's purpose*. Some have found the 'WWJD' 'What would Jesus do as a helpful way to discern. It's true that there might be current circumstances where decisions don't have direct application from scripture guidance. One might there apply broad principles of love, for the greater good. The New Testament abounds in descriptions of *positive qualities*. For example the guidance to the Colossian Christians: 'Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility gentleness and patience. Be tolerant with one another and forgive one another... and to all these qualities add love, which binds all together in perfect unity. The peace that Christ gives you is to guide you in the decisions you make...' (3.12 – 17).

In conclusion, as we enter the season of Lent, we are called to devotion to Jesus, to seek to do his will and follow his example. Traditionally there has come the suggestion of what one might give up for Lent - something sweet or an indulgence. And it would be an aspect of fasting. That may be, but also I like to consider what one might 'take on', in devotional reading, joining a study group, taking times of reflection, or acts of mercy. I remember when a Curate my Vicar in publicising forthcoming events in the Sunday newsheet would headline them 'Opportunities this week.' Right now we could change it to 'Opportunities this Lent'.