**MATTHEW IV: 1-11 SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2023**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Here we are, the first Sunday of Lent, the season which above all marks us as Christians. The season leading up to the crucial, the vital, thing that sets us apart from all other religions: Our Lord was in fact brought back from the dead on that Easter morning nearly two thousand years ago. Rejoice, again I say rejoice! But as we look forward to the supreme moment that brought us salvation from our sins, and what a relief it is!, we need also to remember that in order to get through to the good stuff, the rejoicing at Eastertide, we must first go through and purge out the agonizing bits, the Passion and the Crucifixion, and what lead up to them, the reason that our wonderful Saviour Jesus, utterly without sin himself, that unforgettable healer and teacher allowed himself to be sacrificed in a painful and humiliating death on the cross: the sins of the human race, our failures and the failures of our forebears.

So I think that our gospel portion this morning is apt, because we see Jesus unhesitatingly resisting temptation.

But first, for context, where are we in the story? Quite early on, as a matter of fact, Matthew has told the Christmas story, discussed the ministry of John, and described the way John’s cousin Jesus turned up to be baptized, and the ringing endorsement from above as the Dove descended on him, and the voice from heaven saying “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”. This is before Herod arrested John, or Jesus had collected his posse of disciples, and begun his ministry in earnest.

Jesus after the experience of the baptism retreats alone into the wilderness, where he fasts for forty days and forty nights. That can’t have been a pleasant experience. No food, only the sort of shelter provided from trees or bushes or possibly a cave, who knows what sort of venomous or predatory creatures about. We don’t know what season this was, nor whether he was well enough dressed or shod to meet the demands of the climate. What we can say with certainty is that the young man Jesus was very, very hungry, and probably light headed with it. I’m sure it was a very, very important and necessary spiritual experience. Not a picnic.

But Matthew doesn’t really focus on that part, his purpose is to discuss the temptation offered by Satan. The devil is shown here as clever, very clever. A long time ago, when I was about seventeen, I read in a book somewhere a reference to Satan as the principle of intelligent evil. This frightened me quite a bit, and it took a visit to our neighbour down the road, Canon Maxwell, to calm me down. He explained to me that, at bottom, evil is fundamentally stupid because it divides us from God. That doesn't stop evil from being persistent and incredibly seductive. And Satan begins with a winning card: food. Food governs an awful lot of behaviour, everyone knows that you can get students, especially young men, and we must remember that



Jesus was then living in the body of a young man, and subject to all the problems that go along with that part of being human, we can get these young students to turn up to very, very boring meetings if you advertise free food. But though the devil can quote scripture to his purpose, Jesus knows his Deuteronomy too, and can counter-quote the devil. Easily. Jesus does not fall for that one.

Nor does he fall for the next temptation: to see whether God really meant it when he said that he ‘would command his angels concerning you, and On their hands they will be you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone”. It is quite natural for a young man given a fast car to wish to find out what it can do. But once again, Jesus chooses not to bite at that lure.

And then the devil tries the last and greatest test: Satan will make Jesus the ruler of the universe, able to command oppressors to stop their sinful ways, probably do away with disease and famine and all human ills and perils. Fix all human problems, AND not have to undergo the crucifixion. Think of it: such a time and effort saver, how extraordinarily tempting it must have been to a light headed and famished young man. But at what a cost, a cost that Lucifer hadn’t minded paying, and therefore thought Jesus might go for it, of completely turning his back on God. And once again, Jesus rejected the devil’s offer, and told him to get lost.

Jesus did not give in to temptation, he chose not to sin, even though it would have eased his life, at least in the short term.

It is incredibly difficult to resist temptation sometimes, especially when it offers the prospect of immediate benefit. But if we want to get closer to God, we must give up doing the things that drive us away from God. Give up greed, give up hurting people, give up power plays, give up ignoring the needs of the hungry, the poor, the oppressed, the victims of war and climate change, give up wilful ignorance, give up lying, stop hurting other people, stop violent behaviour. And start doing things that bring us closer to God. That begins with being mindful of our actions, and making choices that bring harm to no one. It sounds simple, but simple isn’t the same as easy.

We are now in the season of Lent, and it is the time to take our souls out of the closet and examine them closely, time to figure out what tempts us down the path away from God, and how we might take example from Jesus and resist temptation. It’s neither easy nor pleasant. Let’s take a few moments to think about repentance of whatever may be on our consciences now.

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After all, Jesus, gentle Jesus, meek and mild, died, on the cross, in physical agony, to save us from our sins. The least we can do is to admit our guilt, say we’re sorry, and promise to do it no more.

Jane Austen said in Mansfield Park something along the lines of “Let other pens than mine dwell on guilt and misery; I quit such subjects as soon as I can”, and I feel the same way. So I’ll

end on a comforting note: the Holy Spirit is with us, comforting and guiding us, in this room, at this moment, and in all places and at all times, in our hearts; on our side; we need only to listen. Amen