

Dear friends,

The first week of Lent is now upon us and we begin to prepare for its culmination in the glory of Easter. In this time of preparation we are taken to when Jesus prepared to begin his ministry. During a time alone in the wilderness, Jesus is tested. Where will he put his faith? What will he trust, and where do his deepest loyalties lie? He showed that, faced with temptation, he could be trusted to do the right thing – and this leads us to explore how we respond when we are tested – and in whom we trust when we are faced with life's challenges. *Every blessing to you all – Margaret*

Call to worship: let us come together before God, who consoles us in our distress.

Let us come together before God, our hiding place from troubles.

Let us come together before God, whose love surrounds us.

Let us rejoice in the Lord, our comforter and refuge.

We place our trust in you, Lord when we get things wrong – when we feel lost and alone – when we are scared and hurting and when we face the unknown. We place our trust in you, Lord, relying on your endless love.

God, our stronghold and deliverer, you are the only Lord, our God – and we trust only in you.

Jesus – you were tempted in the wilderness, but you chose another way.

You were obedient to your Father – you challenged the evil one and reign victoriously.

We bow before you today and sit at your feet, worshipping only you. Amen.

The words to 'Through all the changing scenes of life' written by Nahum Tate [1652-1715] and Nicholas Brady [1659-1726]. It is based on Psalm 34. Singing the Faith 638 Tune: Wiltshire

1 Through all the changing scenes of life, in trouble and in joy,
the praises of my God shall still my heart and tongue employ.

2 Of his deliveries I will boast, till all that are distressed
from my example comfort take, and charm their griefs to rest.

3 O magnify the Lord with me, with me exalt his name;
when in distress to him I called, he to my rescue came.

4 The hosts of God encamp around the dwellings of the just;
deliverance he affords to all who on his succour trust.

5 O make but trial of his love; experience will decide
how blest are they, and only they, who in his truth confide.

6 Fear him you saints, and you will then have nothing else to fear;
make you his service your delight, your wants shall be his care.

Prayers including the Lord's Prayer:

Sovereign God, for the great wonder at the heart of the Gospel – your sharing our humanity and enduring our weakness, we praise you.

You are sovereign over all, yet you became our servant.

You are the holy one of God – yet you were tempted just as we are.

You are the giver of life, yet you endured the darkness of death.

You are the Lord of lords, yet you were crowned with thorns.

You are enthroned on high yet consented to be brought low. In what the world counted as weakness, you displayed true strength. We praise and thank you for your love that is able to turn human expectations upside down – and we rejoice in everything this means for us today – that when we are weak, you are strong – when we feel most helpless, you are most powerful and when we can do little, you can do much.

We thank you that your way is not one of coercion but of love – your power transforming from within – never forcing anyone to comply with your wishes but graciously inviting a response.

We thank you that year after year, generation after generation, you have worked through ordinary flawed individuals like us to make your love known and to bring your kingdom ever nearer.

Sovereign God – Servant God – we praise you that, despite all that conspires against you and frustrates your purpose, it is your will which shall finally triumph for there is nothing able to overcome your goodness – there is nothing which can extinguish your love for us in Christ.

May we live each day in that conviction bringing honour and glory to you.

This time of Lent gives us a chance to reflect on our discipleship – to consider our calling – to test ourselves.

Almighty God, help us to be honest with ourselves – to see ourselves as we really are with all our weaknesses, all our ugliness and sinfulness.

Help us to face all those things which we usually prefer to push aside – all those unpleasant truths we push under the carpet, pretending they aren't there.

Lord, we can fool ourselves, but we can't fool you. We might pretend all is well but we can't conceal our inner pain.

We can deny our need of you but we can't disguise our emptiness without you. We can seek fulfilment in this world but will never find real peace outside your love.

Lord, we claim to be in the faith but sometimes that faith is only skin-deep – we claim to love you, but sometimes that love is flawed.

We claim to serve you yet all too frequently we serve ourselves first.

Search us, Lord – and help us to search ourselves. Control us and help us to control ourselves.

And give us grace to grow strong in faith and whole in Christ for it is in his name that we ask it. Amen.

Though we are tempted and though we make bad choices, through the cross we are assured of healing and forgiveness. In our weakness we are made strong. We are forgiven and God gives us a blank canvas to start again so we may create together something beautiful. Amen.

Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come and thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 4: 1-11. [The Message – translation made by Eugene Peterson]

Next Jesus was taken into the wild by the Spirit for the Test. The Devil was ready to give it. Jesus prepared for the Test by fasting forty days and forty nights. That left him, of course, in a state of extreme hunger, which the Devil took advantage of in the first test. "Since you are God's Son, speak the word that will turn these stones into loaves of bread."

Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy: "It takes more than bread to stay alive. It takes a steady stream of words from God's mouth."

For the second test the Devil took him to the Holy City. He sat him on top of the Temple and said: “Since you are God’s Son, jump.” The Devil goaded him by quoting Psalm 91: “He has placed you in the care of angels. They will catch you so that you won’t so much as stub your toe on a stone.”

Jesus countered with another citation from Deuteronomy: “Don’t you dare test the Lord your God.”

For the third test, the Devil took him to the peak of a huge mountain. He gestured expansively, pointing out all the earth’s kingdoms, how glorious they all were. Then he said: “They’re yours – lock, stock, and barrel. Just go down on your knees and worship me, and they are yours.”

Jesus’ refusal was curt: “Beat it, Satan!” he backed his rebuke with a third quotation from Deuteronomy: “Worship the Lord your God and only him. Serve him with absolute single-heartedness.”

The Test was over. The Devil left. And, in his place, angels! Angels came and took care of Jesus’ needs.

Comment:

Immediately after his baptism Jesus goes into the wilderness. Whenever he had a challenge to face, Jesus spent time alone with the Father. Indeed, we all need times of stillness and quiet to discover who we are and what we aim to do.

There is a tension in Matthew 4:1 because Jesus is led by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil. The same tension is in all our lives because every moment we can choose to serve God or to turn our back on him.

For Jesus the wilderness is where he takes time out to sort out his priorities. Perhaps we need to ask ourselves, ‘What are our priorities?’

Now, temptation is nice! If it wasn’t, we wouldn’t be tempted. To ‘tempt’ in English usually means ‘to lead astray.’ Here, in Matthew, it means ‘to test’ [which is how Eugene Peterson translates it].

We all need times when we test our aims and our priorities or else we will just drift from one thing to another. Temptation isn’t to do with fantasising about what we can do but rather it is facing up to our own potential and ability and seeing that we use them properly. We are tested, tempted, through our thoughts and our feelings – and there is nothing wrong with that. It just shows we are alive! It is how we use our God-given powers – we are free to choose.

The temptations or testings of Jesus are a four-pronged attack. Each is meant to lead him astray. So often we are filled with self-doubt and doubt in God – and that is generally because we have not spent time getting to know ourselves or God!

The temptation to turn the stones into bread is twofold – Look after yourself – bribe people to follow you. If you give people things you will have a following. But Jesus has come to serve and knows that people need more than food and things. They need to know their Creator – and he quotes from Deuteronomy.

In the next test, the devil also uses the Scriptures in quoting from psalm 91. To quote or know the Scriptures – even if you know them word for word – is not enough in itself. We must seek to live by them. Again the temptation is twofold – give people certain assurances and force God to act. Make God do your will by being foolish and reckless and expecting him to save you.

Then the devil offers Jesus the world – though it is not his to give. He urges Jesus to turn from God and to worship him. We may not worship the devil, but if ever we become so besotted with things [like football, cars, fashion etc] so that they become our be-all and end-all, we are being led astray by him.

The devil wanted Jesus to compromise and to give in to evil, if only a little. But Jesus chases the devil off for the moment with another quotation from Deuteronomy. He has come through this testing time – but he knows that the devil will return to try again.

Illustration: [David Adam]

One of the Desert Fathers prayed that all his passions should be taken away so that he would not be tempted. He then went to one of the Elders and said: ‘You see before you a man who is not tempted and is at rest.’

The Elder replied: 'Go and pray that some struggle is stirred up in you for the soul only matures through its battles against evil.'

The monk did as he was asked and when temptation came he didn't ask to escape it but instead prayed: 'Lord, give me strength to get through the fight.'

Temptation is part of being alive to what is around us. We will be tempted as long as we live.

Prayers: Lord Jesus Christ, we praise you for your love, courage and commitment to walking the way of the cross. We thank you that, though you had good reason to succumb to temptation, you stood firm to the end, refusing to compromise your calling. Forgive our weakness that stands in such contrast to your strength – the ease with which we are led astray – the readiness with which we dilute our principles – the excuses with which we shut out your voice, preferring our own instead. Help us to know you more faithfully – not in any attempt to earn your love, but simply to respond to it, celebrating the grace that reconciles us to you, despite all that keeps us apart. Amen.

The words to 'What a friend we have in Jesus' written by Joseph Medlicott Scriven [1819-1886]. StF 531

1 What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!

What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer.

O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear,
all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.

2 Have we trials and temptations, is there trouble anywhere?

We should never be discouraged: take it to the Lord in prayer.

Can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrows share?

Jesus knows our every weakness: take it to the Lord in prayer.

3 Are we weak and heavy-laden, cumbered with a load of care?

Precious Saviour, still our refuge – take it to the Lord in prayer!

Do your friends despise, forsake you? Take it to the Lord in prayer;

in his arms he'll take and shield you, you will find a solace there.

Closing Prayer:

Do not be discouraged, for you are not alone.

Do not lose heart, for Christ is in you.

Do not lose your way, for Christ is with you.

Do not lose strength, for you are filled with his Spirit.

Do not stay here, for Christ is sending you.

Go on into the week ahead, and live in him. Amen.

Let us go forth with the love of God surrounding us – with the wisdom of God guiding us – and with our trust in God protecting us. Amen.