

## The time of trial.

We have a romantic view of ‘wilderness’ these days. The wilderness today is all about natural beauty usually a rainforest or a tall forest, peaceful and quiet. A place you would want to be. A place you can relax. The reality, of course, is that for most of human history, wilderness was nothing like that. The wilderness was a place of isolation, of despair and loneliness, of separation from all the comforts of life. Where life itself was a day-to-day struggle – and the ancient Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness – many of them thought that slavery back in Egypt wasn’t so bad, compared to what they had to go through in the wilderness.

But it’s into the wilderness that the Spirit leads Jesus in our gospel reading today – it’s one of the traditional readings for the first Sunday in Lent. It is a bit of a strange reading and it captures a strange event.

Matthew chapter three ends by telling us: *As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. <sup>17</sup>And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”* (Matthew 3:16-17)

And then, the first verse of chapter 4 tells us, “Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”

That’s not the sort of thing that we would normally expect of the Holy Spirit, is it? But as I say, it’s a strange event... but it is one that is recorded in Mark and Luke as well as here in Matthew. It’s strange – and it’s supernatural: There’s the devil, of course, and the transportation of Jesus to the top of the temple and to a high mountain, and then there’s the with the angels coming to take care of Jesus at the end.

And yet, here it is. What are we to take from it?

I mentioned earlier the common modern-day interpretation of wilderness as the place of great natural beauty and I admit that when I hear the word ‘wilderness’ my first thought is almost always the South-West wilderness in Tasmania.

In 1992, I got up close and personal to the Tasmanian wilderness, when I went on a rafting trip down the Franklin River. And while the wilderness was impressive and majestic and unspoiled, and awe inspiring – I have to tell you it was a incredibly unpleasant place to be. It was cold, it was wet, it was physically demanding to move anywhere – on the river or off, every surface was hard or muddy or slippery or steep (or some combination of all those things), the scrub and trees were prickly. The wildlife was abundant, but consisted almost entirely of leeches. But the most striking thing was the isolation. There were nine of us in two rafts, in ten days on the river, we saw five other people. This was the days before satellite phones, so the only way of contacting

the outside world was by Flying Doctor radio – and the one time we tested it, the valley we were in was too steep and deep for the signal to get out.

At least on the river we got to talk to each other. And we had plenty of food.

But Jesus was alone. We might romanticise time alone and call it solitude – but it was isolation. He'd left his home and travelled to the Jordan to be baptised and then gone, led by the Spirit, alone, into the wilderness. He'd left behind all the comforts of his life to that point, and gone out into the wilderness. No comforts, no food, no company.

Matthew tells us it is no accident that Jesus went into the wilderness – he was led into the wilderness by the Spirit. Jesus' time of trial in the wilderness was part of God's plan and just like Jesus took his place with the people he came to save when he was baptised by John, he then undergoes temptations in the wilderness, just like the temptations that all people, including us, face.

The temptations are presented to Jesus by the devil, who Jesus calls Satan. It's a clear confrontation between good and evil, but also a confrontation between the person Jesus, God the Son, and the devil who is the personification of all that is opposed to God.

The scriptures tell us of three specific temptations – and it's easy to think of them as simply three different temptations, but I think there's an escalation going on here.

The first temptation is to turn the stones into bread.

But Jesus resists the devil's first temptation by quoting scripture.

The devil isn't done though – he turns things around and quotes scripture back at Jesus in the second temptation, when he tempts Jesus to call on the power of God to save himself from physical harm.

But again Jesus resists.

Then, once more, the devil ups the ante, finally, offering him everything! “all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour” (4:8) Everything. “All these I will give you” says Satan “if you will fall down and worship me.”

Temptation can be like that.

It starts with the small things, to bend the rules slightly, to get things done, it's easier and quicker this way, there's no harm in it, and after all, everyone does it.

It's the thin end of the wedge, though. Once you've accepted the small bribe, it's easier to accept the large one. Once you've added a few extra deductions to your tax

return...well – why not leave out declaring some income too? And if you’ve bought a TV that ‘fell off the back of a truck’, why not get a PlayStation 5 to go with it?

But even resisting the small temptations doesn’t mean the larger ones don’t come – and the temptations certainly got larger for Jesus. But the truth is that if we don’t resist the small ones, then we stand little chance against the large ones.

CS Lewis writes in The Screwtape letters, when he tells of the devil Screwtape giving advice to the young devil Wormwood about winning souls for evil “...the safest road to hell,” says Screwtape, “is the gradual one - the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.”

In the time of trial, it is easy to fall.

Jesus told us to pray against temptation – and we regularly do: “Save us from the time of trial”, we pray, or in the older language “Lead us not into temptation”.

The temptations that the devil puts to Jesus don’t seem too bad, on the face of them. Jesus had been fasting for forty days, and the reading tells us that he was hungry... which seems like a bit of an understatement for someone who had been fasting that long. Forty days might seem unlikely, but forty is a symbolic number in the bible – the 40 days of the Great Flood, 40 years the nation of Israel spent in the wilderness between escaping slavery in Egypt and arriving in the promised land, and the 40 days that Moses spent on Mount Sinai with God to receive the commandments. Jesus’ 40 days may be symbolic, but a 40 day fast is quite possible. The Irish hunger striker Bobby Sands, died after fasting 66 days in 1981, and several other hunger strikers lasted longer.

Matthew tells us that after his fast, Jesus was hungry – or perhaps we might say starving or famished. So the devil says to him “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” (4:3). Not even a fancy meal, but bread. A staple. What could be possibly wrong with that?

And the devil includes a challenge when he says “If you are the son of God...” It’s a trick. The devil is making it hard for Jesus to respond without being wrong.

Feeding people who are hungry is not a bad thing – Jesus speaks harshly of those who choose not to feed the hungry, Jesus feeds the five thousand, (14:13-21), John records that after his resurrection Jesus suggested casting the nets over the other side of the boat, so that fish may be caught (John 21). But the gospel accounts show us that when Jesus miraculously produced food it was for the benefit of others, not for himself

The devil challenges Jesus on two counts – to demonstrate that he is the son of God, and to feed himself.

Jesus responds with scripture – a quote from Deuteronomy – “*Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.*”(8:3).

And so trial gets harder. Transporting Jesus in some way to the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem, Satan challenges Jesus again “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down”. Again there’s the challenge “If you are the Son of God” then you can show it by doing this thing.

This time though, the devil quotes scripture – from Psalm 91 “*He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.*” He is challenging Jesus to put himself in danger, so that God can save him.

Again, Jesus responds with Deuteronomy again “*Do not put the Lord your God to the test*” (Deut 6:16). Instead of the devil selectively quoting a scripture, Jesus quotes a scripture which gives a general principle. Yes, God will protect his chosen for God’s purposes, but Jesus didn’t, and we don’t get to set up demonstrations.

And so Jesus resists the devil’s second temptation, and the devil in response goes all out with the third. “*Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.*””(4:8-9)

All this. Everything. Jesus could rule all the kingdoms of the world. Without the hassle of his ministry journey, without the agony of Gethsemane, without the betrayal and, without dying.

This was not just the third, but it was the ultimate temptation.

But the cost? Worshipping the devil. Turning away from his father in Heaven, and turning to Satan.

Jesus once again turns to Deuteronomy in response “*Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only*” (Deut 10:12).

Jesus dismisses the ultimate temptation, “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

With that, Jesus has resisted the ultimate temptation. What more than *everything* could the devil offer?

With that response, the time of trial had passed and the devil left him, Matthew tells us, suddenly angels came and waited on him. (4:11) We know that Jesus will be challenged again, and in Luke’s gospel the account of the temptation in the wilderness even notes that the devil left Jesus until an opportune time. But in the meantime, the angels look after him: after the fasting, after going through the time of trial, Jesus is comforted.

...

As we look back at the temptations that the devil put to Jesus, we can see that what the devil was offering were not bad outcomes. The devil wasn't offering Jesus indulgent banquets, the pleasures of the flesh, or ostentatious wealth. The temptations were far more insidious. Food for the hungry, personal safety, Jesus ruling the world.

Good outcomes: but at what price?

We see in modern society, the end being used to justifying the means. We go to war to make peace. We accumulate wealth and justify that by using some of it for good things and claiming that our prosperity will 'trickle down' to those less fortunate, we suppress speech so that we can be tolerant.

As a church, we will be tempted to compromise the faith we hold.

And as a church, will we often be tempted to focus on the good that we can do. For refugees, world poverty, indigenous people, the environment, fair trade, the fair distribution of wealth and power, climate change, ensuring workers aren't exploited, peace, literacy, freeing minority groups from oppression and discrimination, helping farmers, fighting corruption, working against drug and alcohol abuse, helping the homeless, dealing with domestic violence, caring for the elderly and infirm, providing hospitality and opening our doors to others.

They are all good and worthwhile causes, and all things that we have been encouraged to do and things that have been faithfully worked on by Christians in response to the gospel. But as we engage in those causes, the temptation is often to focus on those causes, we must ensure we are not distracted from our focus on Jesus. To remember that people do not live on bread alone. Nor freedom alone. Nor care alone. Nor fair treatment alone. If we focus on those good actions, it is all too easy to start thinking that those actions are what bring us closer to God, and if we can only do more good things then God will think more of us.

We need to remember, as Paul tells us in his letter to the Colossians (1:22), "[Jesus] *has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present [us] holy and blameless and irreproachable before [God]*". While the temptation is always there to think that we can get closer to God through racking up "good works", the only way to be closer to God is through the saving grace of Jesus, who has done all that is needed to reconcile us to God.

We should all watch for - and be conscious of - the temptations that confront us, whether blatant or subtle, and let's look to the example of Jesus in resisting them.

When we are in the wilderness of 21<sup>st</sup> century St Ives and surrounds, when we are tempted by wealth and comfort and safety and quick results and good causes, let's

make sure that our focus is on Jesus. Jesus who has overcome temptation, the devil, sin and death, and who calls us to turn to him in faith.

As we travel through our own times of trial, let us put our trust – and hope – in the one who has overcome all, in our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen.