

Reflection for Lent 1 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

“So you are the Son of God? Very well then - go on, prove it!”

That is the challenge laid down by the devil to Jesus during the temptations in the wilderness - three times he comes up to Jesus, each time in a different setting and, in a different way, he poses exactly the same question. “So you are the Son of God? Very well then - go on, prove it!”

Jesus' response on each occasion does, in fact, do exactly that. He affirms clearly that he is the Son of God, and he does so without falling for the devil's trickery or temptation.

As the narrative unfolds it is a bit like watching two politicians debating or arguing with each other: one looking to catch the other out through slyness of word, playing on the other's ego, looking for the moment to cut the other down once the bait is taken. Jesus though sees the bait or temptation hanging in front him but refuses to fall for it.

The story is one I am sure we are all familiar with. We read it each year at beginning of Lent, as recorded in the different gospels – this year it is Matthew's version. Jesus' handling of the temptations provides a practical guide or model as to how we should handle temptation in our own lives.

Our Old Testament reading today is, again, one I am sure most of us are familiar with, and it is an illustration of how **not** to deal with temptation; rather, how to fall for it with its resulting consequences.

In the Genesis story, the innocent harmony of Eden was then ruined by the “fall” - the entry of sin. But the mistakes of Adam and Eve are typical of all sins, however great or small. In the story, temptation comes through the figure of the serpent, who begins by emphasizing the strictness of the law (God had put only one tree out of bounds) and questioning God's goodwill towards humanity. The serpent then challenges God's judgment by claiming ‘you will not surely die’ and promised instead sophistication (that their eyes will be opened) and spiritual advancement (that they will be like God).

The lure of instant pleasure (*she saw that the fruit was good for food*) and supposed maturity, is too much and Eve succumbs and persuades Adam also to eat.

In so doing they preferred the serpent's suggestions to God's command, and immediately guilt and shame grips them. Their opened eyes saw only their failings, and they attempted to hide from each other and from God.

At the heart of what was going on was “self” and “instant gratification”. That does not sound like a story from the past - rather from the present.

One of the churches I served at in the past was St Peter's, Alton in Staffordshire.

St Peter's had a font that dated from the 15th Century, and it was situated close to what, at the time of its installation, would have been the church door. Carved into the base of this font was the image of serpent slithering towards the church door - a symbol of the washing away of self and sin at baptism, of turning away from sin and to God.

Jesus, in the temptations, by contrast does the opposite to Adam and Eve: he does not put self first or instant results first, rather he is concerned with obeying the will of the God. How does Jesus do it, when Adam and Eve fail?

Firstly, in his dealing with the devil, Jesus underpins not only his response but also his whole attitude with scripture. In each case he quotes from the book of Deuteronomy, “the second book of the law”, a book which re-states the law given to Moses. This is literally the word of God – it

provides the base on which, for him, all else is built and the same should be true for us. The foundation of Scripture!!

One of the articles found in the Church of England prayer book puts it like this. *“Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not required of any man”*: words which sum up so well the place scripture should have in our life of faith.

The fact that Jesus not only knows, but also truly understands scripture is the first important thing. The more time we spend looking at, reading and seeking to understand scripture, the more we understand not only who God is and his salvation plan but also the way he intends us to live our lives.

It is not simply though about knowing the words of scripture - the devil shows that, as he too uses, or should I say misuses, scripture in an attempt to trap Jesus. Rather, it is about fully understanding the will of God, what God is saying to us through his word, and how that relates to the way we live our lives today.

Look at Jesus response to the first temptation - turning a stone into bread. It could be summarized like this. *“You are suggesting that feeding my body takes precedence over obeying my God. But God has told us that we shall not live by bread alone; therefore, I shall not do so.”*

What Jesus is doing here, and the same is true of each of the three temptations, is deliberately responding in a way that empties himself in order to be obedient to the will of God. Rather than putting himself first, rather than putting his own needs first, Jesus is doing the total opposite: he is laying aside the power and the authority that is truly his, in order to be subjected to God’s will. He defeats the powers of this world by his undeviating obedience to the will of God.

If you look back through the pages of the Old Testament you find it is exactly this idea, this attitude, that the prophets time and again encourage the people to adopt. Think first about God’s will, be obedient to that, get your relationship right with God and stop putting your own self-interest before everything else.

Prayer is like that. It is not about bring our own needs to God, it is about being obedient to his will. Your will be done!!!

When you think about temptation that comes to us, so often it is that little voice somewhere deep inside us saying, go on - put yourself first. *(One big, rich cream cake, won’t do you any harm – go on!)*.

Time and again, though, it does not stop there. It is as if we are on a slippery downward slope. The world in which we live seems almost inextricably to encourage us to put ourselves first. So often, though, when we go down that road, it is not only us but also those around us that also get hurt.

The example Jesus places before us though is the total reverse. Not only does he empty himself as he deals with temptation, but that same attitude, that same obedience to the will of God is seen as he walks the way that leads him towards the cross. Again, he defeats the devil, but this time sin and death as well and he does so by weakness and in emptying himself.

Let me pose two questions for us each to ponder as we begin journey through Lent.

Firstly, is my life based on scripture (the word of God)?

Secondly, how much am I prepared to empty myself and allow God to be in control?