

## **SERMON – 29/5/22**

Matthew 3:13 to 4:11

“Then the Spirit led Jesus into the desert to be tempted by the devil.” (Matthew 4:1)

Can I tempt you to a freshly-baked scone with lashings of cream and a dollop of strawberry jam? Or would you like a cigarette? Can I persuade you to have a drink? Or how do any of the following suggestions sound to you – a day off work tomorrow; a night of unbridled passion with the partner of your dreams; the opportunity to knock someone from a position of power? Put as bluntly and as blatantly as that, these invitations to yield to temptation are quite shocking. Maybe you think I know what your secret longings are - be assured, I don't! I have simply plucked these examples from the air. But imagine that you *were* put on the spot publicly – would you give in to whatever temptations assail you while the eyes of others were on you? Probably not.

Of course, some of these things do not present a temptation to us at all – for example, nothing on earth would persuade *me* to put a cigarette to my lips, whereas the prospect of a cream scone... well, let's not go there. Conversely, some of *you* might happily pass by a plateful of cream scones yet give your right arm for just one draw on a cigarette even after many years of abstinence. For some, the things I mentioned should not be regarded as temptations at all, because there is nothing wrong in them – for one person a glass of wine is the perfect accompaniment to a good meal, but we have to recognise that the same glass of wine could be the means of another person's total undoing; for a married couple, a night of passion with their spouse is entirely good and wholesome, a gift from God, but the same actions in other circumstances will be the root of terrible hurt and heartache. Of course while temptations examined in the cold light of day or in the glare of publicity may be sensibly dismissed, temptations stalking you in a lonely moment of weakness are an altogether different matter. As we continue to ponder what it means to be a disciple of Jesus today I'd like to reflect with you this morning on the subject of temptation as we consider the encounter Jesus had with Satan in the desert.

It is the very beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry. No sooner has He been baptised by John and given such a powerful assurance of His calling - 'This is my own dear Son with whom I am pleased' - than He is led, we are told, by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. Straight away we are brought face to face with two important truths about temptation that I want to bring to your attention.

Firstly, it was the Spirit of God who was in control – none of this was happening without the knowledge and the express permission of God, and it is worth taking note of the fact that the same is true for *us* when we face temptation. If you read the opening chapters of the Book of Job, you find the very same scenario. Satan comes before God and suggests that Job only trusts God because life is going well for him. What if life were a real struggle for this man? Would he stand firm in his faith? God agrees to allow the devil to test Job, but it is the *Lord* who sets the boundaries within which Satan is permitted to torment him. Or if you turn to 1 Corinthians ch.10, you discover a wonderful truth – 'God keeps His promise, and He will not allow you to be tempted beyond your power to remain firm; at the time you are put to the test, He will give you the strength to endure it, and so provide you with a way out.' (1 Cor. 10:13)

And the second thing to say is that although God is in charge, it is not God but Satan who tempts us. 'If a person is tempted, writes the apostle James, he should not say, "This temptation comes from God." For God cannot be tempted by evil and He Himself tempts no-one. But a person is tempted when they are drawn away and trapped by their own evil desire.' (James 1:13-14) There is a real difference between testing and temptation – God may test us, so that we may be purified and built up, but the Evil One tempts us with no other goal than to trip us up and cause harm to us and hurt to others.

We need to be aware of that context and to be much more open with ourselves about what is going on spiritually when we find ourselves in a tempting situation. And to help us do that, I'd like to consider with you this morning how Jesus responded to the sly attacks of the devil and how we might be better prepared to stand up to whatever temptations may come our way.

Three times Satan came to Jesus to tempt Him. Each time the temptation was subtly different. Firstly, the devil assailed Jesus physically. He had been fasting for an extended period and he was physically very hungry. Seeing a way to exploit Jesus' weakness, the tempter moves in: 'If you are God's Son, he says, order these stones to turn into bread.' Now, what an enticement that must have been. For you, if you have been on a long and hard diet, or if you are trying to give up smoking, or if you know that alcohol is no good for you, or if you are sexually frustrated, the physical urges of the body will be extremely strong. How very attractive is the tempting thought of the forbidden. But Jesus doesn't pause to weigh up the pros and cons. He doesn't allow the tempting thought to snuggle down for a while in His mind where, of course, it will only take root and grow stronger. No, He comes straight back at the tempter with Scripture – 'Man cannot live on bread alone but needs every word that God speaks.' The Letter to the Hebrews tells us that the Word of God is alive and active, sharper than any double-edged sword. *That* is your weapon against temptation – not mind over matter but God's Word. As Martin Luther's hymn says about resisting the devil: 'A *word* will quickly slay him.' If you know that something is likely to tempt you physically, then arm yourself with Scripture – a text that will allow you to fix your eyes on what God has done for you and on the ways in which the Lord brings you satisfaction and fulness of life, a text that will allow you to dismiss the Evil One without discussion and be the kind of person that brings pleasure to our Father in heaven.

Secondly, the tempter assails Jesus mentally, and this is the kind of territory you can find yourself in if you start an internal debate in the midst of temptation. The devil takes the Lord Jesus in His imagination to the highest point of the Temple and comes back at Him with a text of Scripture himself. 'If you are God's Son, throw yourself down, for the scripture says: "God will give orders to His angels about you; they will hold you up with their hands so that not even your feet will be hurt on the stones.'" What a clever bit of strategy the devil employs, taking a Bible verse out of context and suggesting to Jesus that to throw Himself from a high place is actually to entrust Himself in faith to God's keeping. In reality he is trying to persuade Jesus to believe that black is white. One cream scone won't matter, just one cigarette, just one drink, just

an innocent kiss or hug – I’m strong enough to say no to the next step and if I trust God to save me, well then it’s bound to be alright. But what does Jesus teach us to pray? ‘Lead us not into temptation.’ What did the Letter of James say? ‘God tempts no-one. But a person is tempted when they are drawn away and trapped by their own evil desire.’ If temptation rears its head, don’t have a debate with the tempter, don’t see how near the edge of the precipice you can go – the stakes are too high. Jesus answered: ‘The scripture also says: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”’

Finally, Satan plays his trump card. He comes to the heart of the matter, spiritually. The devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour and says, ‘All this I will give you, if you kneel down and worship me.’ It’ll all work out OK. You can have your cream scone *and* lose weight. You can smoke all you like *and* enjoy wonderful health. You can drink yourself under the table *and* be fine for work and for your family. You can commit adultery *and* get away with it. But, hold on a minute – those are lies. ‘All this I will give you,’ promises the devil – but it wasn’t his to give. Do we have the discernment to recognise the spiritual root of our temptation, that whatever it may be that is consuming our thoughts is actually seeking to take the place of God in our lives and rob us of all the deep and rich blessings that He intends us to have. ‘Go away, Satan,’ cries Jesus. ‘The scripture says: “Worship the Lord your God and serve only Him.”’

And, you know, the passage ends with some of the most wonderful words in the Bible. ‘Then the devil left Jesus, and angels came and attended Him.’ With the Lord given His rightful place, and with control given over to the Spirit of God, we are at home with Him, we are safe in Him.

Although the Spirit came down upon Jesus like a dove and rested on Him in that moment of high commitment at His baptism, it was the *same* Spirit who led Christ into the wilderness to be tempted. Each and every one of us faces temptations of different kinds but we are not alone in our struggles and if we find ourselves assailed by temptation it is certainly not something we should beat ourselves up about. God may allow you to be tested and tested severely, but rest assured of this – He will not allow

you to be tempted beyond your ability (with His help) to withstand that temptation.

It may be something brutally physical, something even as powerful as an addiction; it may be something more subtle, something that assaults your thoughts or seeks to twist your attitudes – the temptation to think of yourself more highly than you ought and to put other people down, or the temptation to think of yourself as worthless and to put yourself down; it may even be the temptation to turn your back on God altogether or to exchange the truth of God for a lie. Whatever it is, don't try and brush temptation under the carpet. It needs to be dealt with. God will help you to overcome it by His Word, through prayer and by His living presence with us in the sacraments and in every moment of every day always. Look to Him, put your trust in Him, walk with Him wherever He may lead you.

'Then the devil left Jesus, and angels came and attended Him.'