

Brancepeth sermon
18 January 2026

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

Psalm 32

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy
Spirit.*

Amen

We are focusing on this first Sunday in Lent

on Jesus' time in the wilderness:

his forty days of fasting, of prayer, and of

wrestling with temptation.

One thing to notice is that, although we're not told this directly,

it seems pretty clear that Jesus went into the wilderness *alone*.

That's an obvious point, perhaps,

and probably how most of us imagine the scene.

But think what it means.

It means that we have no source for what happened in the wilderness
except Jesus himself.

He must himself have been the one who told his disciples
that he had been tempted, and *how* he had been tempted.

And *that* might affect how we imagine what went on.

Because the description we are given is that
the tempter, the devil, came and spoke to him,
and it's easy to imagine that Jesus met an angelic figure perhaps -
though not one of the good kind -
or perhaps that he heard a voice,
that he perceived as clearly distinct from his own,
and that his task was, therefore,
simply one of working out how to respond to this voice.

But what if Jesus' description to his disciples
of what happened in the wilderness
was his way of making sense of it *after the event*;
what if he in fact experienced these temptations
simply as thoughts bubbling up in his own mind,

possibilities occurring to him as attractive;
and what if it was only as he then pondered these thoughts
that he began to identify them *as* temptations,
as the voice of a tempter seeking to deflect him?

In other words, what if the difficulty that Jesus faced in the desert
was not simply a matter of the strength of his will -
whether he would have the willpower,
even in his weakened state, to resist these temptations -
but also, and more deeply, a matter of *discernment*,
of his learning, in the light of his growing sense of his mission,
to recognise these thoughts in his mind *as* temptations,
and so to recognise that they *needed* resisting?

That might help us realise how *real*
these temptations could have been for Jesus -
ideas that might at first have seemed like *his own good ideas*.

And it might help us understand
how *we* might be faced with analogous temptations -
possibilities that might at first seem like good ideas,

possibilities that might at first not seem like *temptations* at all, but that we nevertheless need to learn to resist.

Consider the first of Jesus' temptations:

the temptation to turn stones into bread.

This is, in part, simply a temptation to find comfort in the midst of the rigors that he was putting himself through.

Would that have been so bad?

There is, after all, nothing wrong with eating bread - he's going to do a lot of it later on, including bread that he has miraculously produced, albeit not from stones.

So why did he come to think that, in *this specific context*, this was a *temptation*, something to be resisted?

Well, he was there in the wilderness for a purpose, to get away from all distractions, to pray, to put aside anything that might dull his perception, and to listen for what his Father wanted from him.

He was there in order to listen out for the Father's voice.

And in *that* context, comfort would have been a distraction;

at the same time that it was filling his stomach,
bread would have blocked his ears.

Jesus realised that he needed to stay the course,
to choose listening over everything else.

In this context, for these forty days,
the Word of God was to be his food, and not bread.

Now, I don't think that any of us, necessarily,
faces exactly the same temptation as Jesus,
but we might face something analogous.

As each of us seeks the right way forward in our own lives;
as we seek to discern together the way forward for us as a church,
there can be a temptation to choose *comfort* over our *calling*.

There's nothing wrong with comfort as such;
there's nothing wrong with the familiar,
the recognisable,
the safety of the known, of the well-worn way.

But that same comfort that can so often be a good thing,
can at times get between us and our calling.

Listening this Lent to what God wants of each of us,

and what God wants of all of us together,

we need to be open to the possibility that
God wants to lead us on *un*comfortable paths,
on paths that will take us well away from our comfort zones –
lead us into a more radical Christian inclusion, perhaps,
a wider welcome,
opening our arms as a church
to people who don't fit so easily into our life here,
and who shouldn't be *made* to fit into our life as it is,
before they are allowed to belong,
simply to keep the rest of us comfortable.
Might comfort be a temptation for us, here and now?

And then there's the second temptation;
the one where Jesus is tempted to throw himself from a high place
to call out God's rescue.

We know that later on,
Jesus *will* believe that following his calling means

heading directly into danger in Jerusalem
and trusting in God not to let that danger defeat him,
so such an idea might already have made deep sense to him
out here in the wilderness.

And just think how attractive this possibility might have seemed.

If he had jumped, and been rescued,
everyone would have *known* that he was God's chosen;
everyone would have *seen*.

And, more to the point, Jesus himself would have known.

He would have had proof that God was on his side,
that his sense of calling was real, that it was all *true*.

But reaching out for that kind of certainty
at this point in his journey
would have been a short-circuit;
it would have short-circuited the journey of learning
on which Jesus was to lead his disciples,
and it would have short-circuited his own journey of discovery,
his learning of what obedience to his Father meant for him.

So if the first temptation was a temptation to misplaced *comfort*,
this one is, in part, a temptation to misplaced *certainty*.

And, again, even if we are not tempted in exactly the same way as Jesus,

I think we face analogous temptations –

the temptation to the easy answer,

the temptation to cheap confidence,

the temptation to quick solutions that demand no wisdom,

no wrestling, no discernment, but come to us ready-made.

Beware *anyone* who sells you

quick solutions to deep-rooted problems.

All those websites telling you that ‘one weird trick’

will solve your health problems,

relieving you of the long, hard work of changing your habits.

Any politicians who promise quick fixes

to major social problems,

especially those ‘quick fixes’ that involve

pinning the blame on some group of already marginalised people.

Any church leader who promises

that one more project, one more initiative, will generate growth,
rather than the long, hard work of loving our neighbours.

As we look for the way forward in our own lives,
and as we look for the way forward for our church,
we need to avoid the temptation to the quick answer,
the easy solution, the confident but cheap certainty.

Instead, there's work to do,
there's a journey of learning to go on,
to go on discovering how best to live out our calling
to love God and neighbour,
and there are no shortcuts.

And then, finally, there is the third temptation, to worship the devil.

I don't think this presented itself to Jesus as a literal demand
that he bow down and worship Satan;
that one would surely have been very easy
for *any* devout person to resist;
it would be *obvious* that you were meant to say no to that.
No, I think this was something more like the thought that,

if he would just *play by the world's rules*, at least for a time,
then he could make a difference, *then* he could be a force for good.

I think it was the temptation to think that
it would be okay to build up popularity and influence
by the normal means,
and *then* to use it to pursue the Father's mission -
to build up a position of strength, and *then* to change the word.

And I think that we face a temptation something like that
in the church today -
perhaps not very strongly in St Brandon's,
but certainly in the Church of England more generally,
the temptation to court populism,
to side with the noisy crowd,
and not to worry too much about what the crowd is chanting,
because siding with them will give us purchase,
it will give us influence,
a position of strength that we can *then* use for good.

It is the temptation, for instance,
for the sake of influence, for the sake of impact,

to join hands with those marching against immigrants,
to join hands with those waving flags -
not as a symbol of belonging, but as a symbol of division,
a symbol meant to let others know where they *don't* belong.

But Jesus knew that the path of strength,
the path of influence, the path of power, the path of populism,
was a temptation to be resisted.

Because he knew that his Father consistently
chooses the weak, the powerless, the marginalised, and the excluded.

He knew that, whenever a crowd is making any
community feel afraid, feel that they do not really belong,

God is *not* on the side of the crowd,
but on the side of those they despise.

So, as we go through this Lent,
let's face up to the temptations that beset us,
and commit again to following Jesus,
even when he takes us away from comfort
of staying in the cosiness of our familiar group;
even when he tells us that we still have much to learn,

about loving our neighbours, and welcoming them with open arms;

and even when he tells us that the path he has for us

is not to side with strength and popularity,

but to side with the friendless and the excluded -

the way of the cross.

And perhaps asking what all that might mean for us,

individually and together,

can be our Lenten discipline this year.

Amen