

Sunday 17th February 2013 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.; 7 p.m.		1st Sunday in Lent – Year C
Deut 26:1-11	Ps 91:1-2, 9-16	Romans 10:8b-13
		Luke 4:1-13
Standing against temptation		

The newspapers, TV, facebook and twitter over these past few days have been filled with the terrible tragedy of the Valentine’s Day shooting of Reeva Steenkamp, girlfriend of Oscar Pistorius, and his subsequent appearance in court. Here in Grahamstown, there has been the great big gathering on Rhodes campus as part of the One Billion Rising protest against rape and violence. The dreadful rape and mutilation, and murder, of Anene Booysen in Bredasdorp, and a few weeks back of Lee Anne Gordon in East London, and the rapes that occur with regularity here in our own community, are utterly terrible. Lives are being destroyed. Our hearts go out to survivors, victims, their families.

It is too easy, perhaps, to point fingers at others. We would never go down that road – or so we believe. But what about our own rage and anger? Our jealousy or hatred? Our own passions? What drives us? What stirs within us? Today’s gospel reading on the temptations of Jesus asks these questions.

1st POINT – Lent & the wilderness

We are in the season of Lent, the 40 days from Ash Wednesday until Easter Day. After Jesus had been baptised, he was “led by the Spirit into the desert” (Luke 4:1) for 40 days of tempting. Lent is our time in the desert, the wilderness, as we imitate Jesus: this is our time to be tempted, our time of testing: a time to prepare for what lies ahead. Why is this so important?

A friend of mine recently spent a week on a health farm, as part of her recovery from a serious illness. It was wonderful, she said – a strict diet; no TV or cell-phones, careful exercise: she returned home feeling a lot better; cleaned out; refreshed, ready to face the world. We need both physical and spiritual cleansing: a time to strip away the rubbish with which we clutter up our lives, and our bodies – a time to get to what is really important. It's like a sports team who go away for pre-season training.

Lent is like that for us. It is pre-season training, preparation for worship, witness and service, preparation for the new resurrection life at Easter. We observe the Lenten disciplines of prayer, giving to others, and fasting, as part of this cleaning-out of our lives.

Jesus was in the desert, the wilderness – and we go into our own desert. When we do this, we identify as Jesus did with the wilderness journey of the people of Israel. As they fled from their life of slavery in Egypt, on their journey to the Promised Land, they learned to trust in God. They learned to look to God for food and water, for guidance, for their daily needs. They were shaped into the people of God.

A desert is a tough, bleak place. No water, no food, no shelter, no road. Without help, we are lost and we die. Our lives can represent a desert: we may be lonely, desolate, filled with despair, hopeless – just like the Israelites. And like the Israelites, it is in the desert that we are given the opportunity to look to God for our every need.

2nd POINT – temptations of Jesus

During his time in the desert, Jesus was tempted by the devil. Matthew and Luke describe three temptations. They are the three big temptations that we all face at some time or other: wealth, power, bodily appetites - money, sex and power.

“If you are God’s Son, order this stone to turn into bread.” (Lk 4:3) – the temptation that questions Jesus’ relationship with the Father.

Surely, if God loves you, He will provide for you, allow you, give you what you want.

It's the temptation that comes our way through our physical needs and desires – and that plays itself out through alcohol, or drugs, or sex, or food. But the call is for self-control, so that these good things do not become lustful addictions. Lives, families, careers, are destroyed because we don't know when to say no. "Human beings cannot live on bread alone." (Lk 4:4) We are more than just physical bodies. God provides for our need, not our greed.

"Then the Devil showed him all the kingdoms of the world. 'I will give you all this power and wealth ... if you worship me.' " (Lk 4:5-7) It's the temptation of material wealth, of riches, of possessions. For many who have grown up with very little, or been dispossessed, have had land taken away, history of poverty, or who have seen parents work their fingers to the bone to provide for their families, who have known the never-ending struggle to make ends meet – wealth, money, is very attractive. But it can go too far. The desire for wealth, riches, can consume us. It can become the main reason for living. Wealth for the sake of it. Bigger houses. Cars. Luxury. We don't need it.

The alternative to wealth is not poverty. It is simplicity, true generosity, bringing life and blessing to others by how we use what we have been given, what we have received. I know wealthy people who do indeed bring life and blessing, by how they use their resources. Giving away, letting go, can be immensely liberating. Having treasure in heaven, putting our hearts where our treasure is – holding lightly to what we have – loving God first. That is freedom. "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him!" (Lk 4:8)

"Then the Devil took him to Jerusalem and set him on the highest point of the temple, and said to him, 'If you are God's Son, throw yourself down from here.' " (Lk 4:9). It's the temptation to go for the limelight, to be the centre of it all, to dominate, by our acts of power.

It's the temptation that comes our way as we rise up the ranks, as we increase in seniority, as we get to the senior grades at school – the temptation to control, to dominate, to dictate, to crush, to oppress, to bully, to force, to overwhelm, to silence others. We see it in authority figures, whether formal or informal, all around us. We see it in the amakhosi, the spiritual powers that oppress some of our young people.

Power is a reality. We cannot walk away from it. Many of us are in positions of power or influence, or will be. We cannot abdicate or walk away from those positions – but how to use power wisely? And not sell ourselves to the devil? To try to manipulate God, to put the Lord to the test, to allow evil to control our lives in order to have power over others – that is the way of death. “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” (Lk 4:14).

3rd POINT – And so...

Jesus was tempted in every way as we are, yet was without sin (Heb 4:15). He knows our weaknesses; he has been here. We can look to God for strength and wisdom and discernment.

Temptation is not a sin. Testing and temptation strengthens us. We do have to choose – we have a choice. By the grace of God, we are able to stand strong.

We face our own struggles, our own personal need for transformation. “Morals can't be forced” said a recent *Saturday Dispatch* article¹.

Let's use the three Lenten disciplines:

Give – it helps us look beyond ourselves to others; it helps to free us from our dependence on material goods. We give to overcome the temptation of wealth.

¹ Saturday 16th February 2013. Article by Deon Rossouw

Pray – we focus our attention on God, we rest in God’s presence, we listen for God’s voice, we bring all that we are to God. A time to bring prayer into our daily lives. We pray so that we may overcome the temptation of power.

Fast – it helps clear out the clutter in our lives. We may choose to give up certain food or drink, or eat less; some will say no to alcohol, to caffeine, to chocolate, to cigarettes, or even to facebook; we may fast from certain luxuries. Junk food. TV. We fast so that we may be physically and spiritually purified and cleansed and strengthened. We fast to overcome the temptation of our bodily appetites.

CONCLUSION

May God strengthen us to stand against temptation.

Introduction to the Gospel reading (Luke 4:1-11) – 17th Feb ‘13

The gospel reading which we are about to hear is the story of the temptation of Jesus, during his 40 day fast in the wilderness.

The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell of his temptation. Mark simply mentions it; Matthew and Luke are similar and have more detail. There is a dialogue between Jesus and the Devil, and there are the three temptations.

In all three gospels, the temptation of Jesus comes immediately after his baptism in the river Jordan. The Holy Spirit has come upon him. He is about to begin his ministry, his life's work. But first he is tempted or tested to ensure that he does not misuse what he has been given.

The story of the temptation is always read on the first Sunday in Lent. During Lent, we go with Jesus into the wilderness, into the desert. We are called to give, to pray, and to fast, and to face our own inner demons, our struggles and questions, our own temptations.

It is not a sin to be tempted. The temptations of Jesus are the three big temptations that every human being must face. Jesus faced and overcame them, and gives us the strength to face and overcome them as well.