

Jesus Tested

18 February 2024 – Lent 1

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

Do you ever eat something a bit different for breakfast? Perhaps something special that Mum or Dad makes? When our children were small ... we had a tradition in our house that Saturday morning was special breakfast time ... so we made muffins, or pancakes, or scones, or cooked up eggs in a variety of ways, or make French toast or waffles.

Last Tuesday was a special day in the church calendar when traditionally people have cooked **pancakes** ... we'll be doing this after church today ... The special day is called **Shrove Tuesday** and it's the last day before the season called Lent begins in the church.

During Lent, we follow the stories of Jesus walking steadily up to Jerusalem where some people will be cheering loudly for him and other people will get so mad at Jesus that try to hurt him and get rid of him.

As he travels towards Jerusalem, Jesus continues to teach people and to urge them to follow him both in the good times and in the tough times ... when it's easy to be his friend and when it's hard. But whether it's easy or hard, Jesus promises to walk with us and to be with us, whatever happens.

BIBLE READINGS

We listen for the word of the Lord.

Our ears and hearts are open.

Psalm 25:1-10 (responsively)

In you, Lord my God,

I put my trust.

I trust in you;

do not let me be put to shame,

nor let my enemies triumph over me.

No one who hopes in you

will ever be put to shame,

but shame will come on those

who are treacherous without cause.

Show me your ways, Lord,

teach me your paths.

Guide me in your truth and teach me,
**for you are God my Saviour,
and my hope is in you all day long.**

Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love,
for they are from of old.

**Do not remember the sins of my youth
and my rebellious ways;**

according to your love remember me,
for you, Lord, are good.

**Good and upright is the Lord;
therefore he instructs sinners in his ways.**

He guides the humble in what is right
and teaches them his way.

**All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful
toward those who keep the demands of his covenant.**

Mark 1:12-15

After Jesus' baptism, the Spirit immediately sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness for forty days, being tested by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!'

For the word of God in Scripture,
for the word of God among us,
for the word of God within us,
thanks be to God.

MESSAGE

Welcome to the season of Lent that runs for 6 weeks or 40 days, a season that can sometimes feel a bit heavy or sombre, but which is actually a gift where we have time to reflect on Jesus' journey to the cross and what that means for we who follow in the footsteps of Jesus.



Why 40 days? It's based on stories from the Bible such as Moses spending 40 days on Mt Sinai receiving the law but primarily it is based on Jesus being tested in the wilderness for 40 days.

In the Bible 40 is symbolic for a long time. So it's a lengthy season for us to get our heads around what it means to walk with Jesus in the way of discipleship and the choice to follow Jesus despite the cost.

Lent gives us time to reflect on our priorities and who we put our trust in.



Lent is considered a season of repentance – and hence has the liturgical colour of purple.

To repent is literally to change one's mind, and hence change one's actions as a result. It's turning away from certain thoughts or behaviours and

turning towards new thoughts and behaviours. Turning over a new leaf.

Traditionally, Lent is a time for giving up something – fasting – giving up something that is pleasurable or unhelpful and instead taking up something positive.



So there are trivial examples of giving up chocolate or ice-cream for Lent, but perhaps we would do better to fast from social media or fast from complaining about the state of the world without doing something about it. Some of us could fast from busyness or unrealistic expectations that we place on ourselves or other people.

The other side of repentance is taking up good and helpful behaviours. This could be as simple as taking time every day to be thankful for our blessings, or making time to catch up with a friend each week or choosing to go for a walk every day to appreciate God's beautiful creation.

One change that I've chosen to adopt this Lent is to have 7 Lent Candles – which will complement or contrast with our tradition of using Advent candles leading up to Christmas – where each week during Advent we light one more candle to illustrate in a tangible way that light is coming into the world in the person of Jesus who brings hope, peace, joy and love.



During the more sombre time of Lent, we are remembering how darkness is encroaching on the light and seeking to extinguish its message.

So each week we will extinguish one candle as we remember Jesus' costly journey to the cross, before we finally we extinguish the central Christ candle on Good Friday as we remember Jesus' death. On that dark day it seemed that darkness had indeed overcome the light.

But as we know, that was not the end of the story.

Turning to today's Bible reading about the testing or temptation of Jesus, which is the traditional reading on the first Sunday of Lent each year, it's a case of blink and you'll miss it in Mark's Gospel as it's covered in just two verses!

Matthew and Luke have longer versions of the story with Jesus in conversation with Satan, but Mark just gives us the very bare bones.



The story is linked to Jesus' baptism and is part of his preparation for ministry. So one of the questions we might ask is why this testing was needed if Jesus has already been announced as God's beloved Son and anointed with God's Spirit? Does Jesus perhaps have to integrate these foundations into the whole of his life and priorities?

Interestingly it is God's Spirit who drives Jesus out into the wilderness where conditions are rough and life is often precarious. The wilderness is a place that scrapes away some of our masks and delusions and reveals what or who we put our trust in.

The text says that Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days – a long time – being tested or tempted by Satan.

The key word here is the verb **peirazo** which means to trial or put to the test. This can be either positive – being tested so we can prove ourselves true and reliable – or negative – being tempted or induced to do something wrong. So there is a tussle going on between God's Spirit and Satan, between the harshness of the wilderness and the help of angels.

The noun from this same word is **peirasmos** that appears in the Lord's Prayer. The traditional form – lead us not into temptation – picks up the negative connotation – while the modern form of the prayer – save us in the time of trial – is more neutral. Given that this plea is included in Jesus' model prayer – along with the plea to save us from evil (one), it suggests that this is a serious thing.

The one doing the testing is Satan who is considered here to be a spiritual being and the personification of evil. Satan's other names in Scripture include Diabolos the Accuser or Slanderer (usually translated as the Devil), the Tempter, the Evil One, Beelzebul the Ruler of Demons, the Father of Lies, and Lucifer the angel of light ... an all-round bad character and someone to be avoided!



Mark gives no indication of how or in what ways Satan tested Jesus, although Matthew and Luke give more insight.

Satan tempted Jesus to meet his own needs of hunger by turning stones into bread and to seek his own glory in spectacular fashion by leaping off the Temple rather than trusting in God's provision and walking in God's ways. At heart, the temptation or test for Jesus is to follow his own path and seek his own glory rather than to follow God's path.

Jesus' resistance is captured in the psalm we read earlier. As the gospel story unfolds we see Jesus trusting in God's love and mercy, relying on God's goodness and faithfulness, and being guided by God's Spirit.

I wonder how we are tested or tempted?

Perhaps the most pervasive and persistent temptation is to blindly accept our culture's focus on individualism and consumerism, reinforced by advertising, which is not intrinsically evil, yet is constantly making us doubt our self-worth and selling us a message that buying this product or taking up this limited time offer will make us satisfied and fulfilled.



Such temptation is probably not instigated by a personal devil, yet it appeals to our greed and fragile sense of worth and we fall for it. And by falling for it we buy the lie

that we should be focusing on ourselves and our own needs at the expense of the needs of others.

We're tempted to build the kingdom of self rather than building up God's kingdom in our neighbourhood.

At the risk of offending some, here's a current seemingly harmless example.

Global singing sensation Taylor Swift is in Melbourne this weekend doing concerts at the MCG, just in case you've missed it. The hype around Swift is reminiscent of Beatles mania back in the 60s. Now Swift is a very talented singer, song writer and performer who appeals to a variety of fans. She is also a savvy business woman. Her three concerts in Melbourne will earn her a lot of money, will thrill many fans and may deliver an astonishing \$1.2 billion boost to the Victorian economy.



It all seems like a glittering and harmless distraction. And that's the point. Behind all the glamour and the excitement, I can't help wondering whether the extravagance surrounding Swift's concerts is diverting scarce resources from solving other more pressing and serious problems in our midst. I also wonder whether Swift's popularity gives her almost godlike influence over her young fans.

Another current example from the other end of the spectrum.



The fighting in Gaza has been going on for more than four months with no end in sight. The death toll and devastation inflicted on the civilian population of Gaza is ghastly and deeply distressing, as were Hamas' earlier attacks on innocent Israelis. We see the pictures on the TV news, but struggle to comprehend the horror

for those Palestinians being bombed out of their homes with nowhere to go that is safe.

The temptation in this instance is to tune out all the horror and pretend that there is nothing we can do. Let's all tune in to Taylor Swift instead!

Now it's true that there is not much direct diplomatic pressure that Australia can apply to Israel or to Hamas, but all of us can pray for this madness to end and ask God to change the hearts of the leaders of Israel and Hamas and other influential world leaders towards mercy and peace.

The call and invitation of Lent is to refocus our priorities and to join Jesus in resisting evil, whether it comes to us in the guise of shiny entertainment that distracts our attention or the horrors of war that we can't bear to look at.

With these thoughts in mind, let us turn to our Lent candle liturgy ...

CANDLE LITURGY

On this first Sunday of Lent,
we remember that Jesus was tempted
and resisted the persuasion of God's adversary.

We too are called to resist all that depletes life in our world.

We extinguish this candle of resistance
even as we accept the call to just resistance,
working for God's peace in the world.