

Welcome to Lent! For most of us, Lent is associated with giving up chocolate or alcohol, but Today's gospel reading takes us in a different direction to simply resisting the occasional Mars bars – other chocolate bars are available.

I was taking assembly at Downe school last Thursday, ready to do a talk on Lent, focusing on Pancake day – shrove Tuesday – then demonstrating Ash of Ash Wednesday. As the children started to get ready I noticed they were not in their school uniform – it was world book day – so there was a selection of Harry Potter characters, Alice in Wonderland ones, and one told me she was Mary Poppins. I knew something had to change – I asked Sandra the head for a bible (yes I know you're asking why didn't I have one with me – answer, because I had a frying pan instead) – and so changed the subject to match world book day – talking about books I had read, and focusing on the bible – not a book but a library – I think I got away with it.

One book I've **not** read is John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, a retelling of the fall of Adam and Eve and hence humanity from God's original created perfection, is fairly well known.

Neither had I even hear of the much less well known sequel, *Paradise Regained*. Especially striking about the latter poem is its subject -- not the birth, crucifixion, or resurrection of Jesus, but his temptation, the subject of today's Gospel text. Milton rightly saw that in resisting the devil's temptations Jesus initiated the possibility for humanity to regain the paradise lost following humanity's disobedience in Eden.

So to our gospel reading – Luke 4 – (page 1030) to see Jesus in the Jordanian wilderness – I want to focus on the links between Jesus' temptations, and the events of Genesis 1 – Adam and Eve, and also how the song of Mary from Luke 2 might give an insight into the purposes of God for us today as we begin Lent and look towards Good Friday and Easter.

Jesus and Adam

Luke himself invites us to make such a comparison with the Genesis fall by the way he has set the story. First, he has put the genealogy of Jesus immediately before it. Since Luke's genealogy traces Jesus' lineage all the way back to Adam, the reference to Adam immediately precedes the temptation account. Moreover, Adam is identified in the genealogy as the son of God (3:38), rather obviously inviting comparison to Jesus. So this event is compare and contrast – Adam, and Jesus!

Second, the temptation story is followed by Jesus' announcement of the nature of his ministry in the Nazareth synagogue. The temptation story, as we will see, has as a primary point to show what Jesus is *not* going to do in his ministry. The Nazareth synagogue sermon then gives us the positive: Jesus will bring "good news to the poor... release to the captives... recovery of sight to the blind... the oppressed go free... the year of the Lord's favour" (4:18-19). Mary was told by the angel that Jesus was coming to establish his kingdom (1:33); so what Jesus describes in the synagogue is the nature of his kingdom, the kingdom of God.

His kingdom, of course, is not about the political rule of Israel but rather the reclamation by God of a people who love and serve him as King. Adam and Eve's giving in to temptation resulted in the loss of life in God's presence, Jesus' resistance of temptation was the beginning of the restoration of life in God's presence. If you've got time read Romans 5:12-21 where Paul explains the same thing.

Temptation is a strange thing – is it just about choices – try these – chocolate or crisps, new car or holiday, money or power.... Let's look at the choices Jesus was called to make – see how they might affect us too.

In order to get ready for the work of the Kingdom Jesus then is sent by the Spirit of God into the Judean wilderness to be tempted - Imagine the scene (It's a place I've been to - hot, dusty stony, arid place, not a sand-filled desert – it's a place of beauty, in some ways, if you're only there a while – but 40 days without food, shelter, on your own – that's a real test!).

Yet it's here that Jesus meets three temptations head on...

The First Temptation: Serving yourself

Given the comparison that Luke makes between Jesus and Adam it is perhaps significant that the first temptation (verses 3-4) relates to eating, just as the temptation in the garden of Eden did. More broadly, the temptation is for Jesus to use his authority as the Son of God to meet his personal needs and desires. While this was no doubt a temptation for Jesus throughout his ministry, it is especially during his crucifixion that this would come to the fore again, as he is tempted by the onlookers to save himself from the cross (Luke 23:35-39), and is offered drink. Just as there the temptation is made in a situation of tremendous personal suffering, so too here the temptation to eat comes in a time of severe hunger, with Jesus having fasted for forty days. Mary also draws on Kingdom values in her song – 'he has filled the hungry with good things, and have sent the rich away empty'. What are the good things? Jesus refuses to let his own hunger distract him – It's the words of scripture, the words of God that give life. Jesus reminds himself of Deuteronomy 8:3 – we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. As we have heard him announce in 4:18-19, Jesus' ministry is always focused on others, never on himself.

The Second Temptation: Power

The second temptation (verses 5-8) is a direct appeal to the human desire for power. Jesus is offered the authority and glory of all the kingdoms of the world. For Jesus this was a temptation to embrace what many would have expected of him as the Messiah: political and military might and rule. That Jesus rejects this is a clear sign that his messiahship, his kingdom, is of a different nature than the common expectations. The contrast with Jesus' announced mission in 4:18-19 is again clear: Jesus' mission is about saving others, not about asserting worldly power. Jesus resists satan's lie, his false claim that all the kingdom of the world are his – and Jesus again reminds himself of the words of God in scripture, again Deuteronomy - 6:13 – The Lord God is the only one to be worshipped, the only one to serve.

Again, in her song Mary celebrates the truth of God's kingdom as one where the imbalances of power are corrected – he brings down the mighty from their thrones, and lifts up the lowly.

The Third Temptation: security

The third temptation (verses 9-12), jumping from the pinnacle of the temple, is the most difficult to interpret. On the surface the devil's idea is merely an awe-inducing spectacle. In the ancient world such would likely have been interpreted as the trick of a magician. Note how Satan has got wise, and starts to quote scripture too - Psalm 91:11-12 – he knows the passages about the Christ. Surely God will protect Jesus? Yes, of course, but that's not the point – it's about alternatives. The safe way, or the risky kingdom-shaped way. Once again Satan claims what isn't his to give.

So in part this temptation is that of another alternative path for Jesus' power, leading to fame and riches rather than to service and the cross. But we are likely supposed to see more here, too. The temptation, after all, occurs on the Jerusalem temple. Are we meant to see a foreshadowing and a parody of the crucifixion? As we've already seen, even on the cross Jesus is tempted to save himself from death – and here once again Jesus reminds himself of God's words – Deut 6:16- do not put the Lord your God to the test. Jesus came to give himself for others. This again echoes Mary's words – may it be to me according to your word(Luke 1:38)

The Forty Days of Lent

Jesus is said to be tempted over a forty day period (verse 2). This is likely meant to echo the forty days Moses spent fasting while writing the covenant for the people of Israel (Exodus 34:27-28), and it also is reminiscent of the forty years the Israelites spent in the desert experiencing their own temptations. It is, of course, no coincidence that Lent is a forty day period. So how what happened to Jesus in his temptation help our own forty days of lent?

The common thread in the devil's three temptations is an alternative mission and destiny to the cross and Jesus' pronouncement in 4:18-19; as well as Mary's reflections on the compassion of God for those who would trust him in Luke 2.

As Christians we are called to continue the Spirit-led proclamation and enactment of God's kingdom (note the importance of the Spirit in 4:1, 14, 18), yet we are also tempted to abandon the task God has given us for ways of self-fulfillment, power, and spectacle. Unlike Jesus, we will doubtlessly fail at times.

Lent is the time for acknowledging our failures; seeking God's mercy and redirecting our steps to the way of Jesus.

How do we overcome – if Jesus needed to draw on the word of God, and the power of the Spirit, how much more do we? If Jesus needed to draw on the strength of the scriptures how much more do we?

So Lent is a time not for giving up, but for taking on - letting go of some things that waste time and taking on the disciplines of prayer and discovering the truths of God in the bible.

This will make us ready for the callings God has for you and me, not just during Lent, but well beyond.

Stone...