

## **Sermon for Lent 1 06.03.22 Romans 10: 8b-13 Luke 4 1-13 (Rev Carol Harley)**

A teacher asks a class of eight year olds to draw a picture of God. Harriet, a little girl sitting at the back of class, shoots her hand up and speaks out: 'we can't draw pictures of God', she says, 'because we can't see God with our eyes, only with our minds'. And of course *she's right*. We use imagination, not pencils, to picture God. We can only see God with our minds.

Imagination runs riot when it comes to picturing today's gospel: the story of the temptations of Jesus. Type 'temptations of Jesus' into Google or whatever you use to search the Internet and you'll see what I mean about the power of imagination. Can we see the mystery of Jesus' temptation with our eyes, or only with our minds? So how does this story for the first week in Lent appeal to our imagination?

Some people might say it doesn't, because they find talk of being 'tempted by the devil' off-putting, but suppose this story is a way of imagining something that is common to us all. During my years of training for the priesthood I had the opportunity of taking part in a seminar on religious perspectives in mental health, this was open to people of different faith traditions. A Muslim doctor spoke of an understanding of grief held by some of her religion, who associate mourning with the activity of spirits. Those of us from other faith traditions could recognise much of what she was describing. She said this talk of 'spirits' was a way of expressing inner struggles through what she called a 'spiritual psychology'.

Suppose we approach the story of Jesus' temptation along these lines. Maybe it can help us to explore something that we have in common with Jesus – the inner struggles that test our faith and our loyalty to God.

Jesus is certainly tested but there's a darker side too. The devil works on Jesus' loyalties. Whose interests matter most? What shapes his ambitions? Where does his basic trust lie? Jesus is caught in a struggle we all recognise. Where is the centre of gravity of life to be found? Is it deep within us or somewhere beyond?

'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread'. (Luke 4:3). Famished from his time in the wilderness, who could blame Jesus for wanting to satisfy his appetite? Similar temptations had come along throughout his ministry. In a world of fierce competition for scarce resources - food, money, healthcare, he might consider using his power to meet the human needs that came along. Why not? Because 'one does not live by bread alone' (4:4).

What about the second test? 'Worship me, and the world is yours'. What shapes Jesus' ambitions?

I remember, some 20 years ago after I was ordained a priest, I asked a couple to come round to see me about getting married. I asked them to tell me what they were looking forward to most. 'We've bought a house,' she said, 'and we're going to renovate it.' 'We'll live in it for about five years, then sell it when the price is right, and invest the

profit for something bigger that also needs renovating.’ ‘Then we’ll sell that,’ he added. I struggled to hear anything about discovering and enjoying each other, or learning a new skill together, or perhaps even the faintest possibility of children. Ambitious projects that stretch us can turn into extensions of ourselves. I wondered whether they were preparing to celebrate a relationship or a business partnership!.

Which brings Jesus to the final test. ‘Throw yourself off the temple roof. Your heavenly Father has more than enough angels to keep you from harm.’ Where does Jesus’ basic trust lie?

My sister-in-law, Margaret, and I keep in touch regularly by phone and share news about each-others families. She became a grandmother again eight months ago. When she rang me a few days ago she said her grandson can now sit up without falling over and when he’s on the floor is beginning to crawl. It won’t be long before he starts using the furniture to pull himself to his feet. All good preparation for the risk of walking unaided. He’s testing his balance, getting ready for the day when standing and walking and jumping and riding a bike will be second nature. At the moment he has to test every bit of progress out several times.

We feel at our most secure when we don’t have to check things out all the time. When we simply take it for granted that we can walk, that day follows night, that we are loved. So Jesus’ refusal to put God to the test shows how deeply he trusts the one he calls ‘father’, and how secure he feels in their father-son relationship. How much can we trust God? – The most basic question for believers. Like our trust in ourselves and the world around us, we put our relationship with God to the test until we feel secure enough not to. Growing in faith is like a series of experiments that we run – and may have to repeat when circumstances need it – so trusting God becomes second nature.

How might this morning’s story for the season of Lent transform us?

Testing and temptation bring Jesus close. He is not like the celebrities we see from a distance, watching how they cope – or not – with the demons. ‘The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart’, writes Saint Paul in today’s NT reading, quoting Moses (Romans 10:9b. the word of faith, the good news of Jesus, his experience of testing, is close enough to strengthen us when we are tested and tempted. From the wilderness he returns to Galilee, filled with the power of the Spirit. His testing can be our wisdom, it can be a source of strength as close as our breathing, filling our imagination with courage and hope.

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