



GOSPEL GOSSIP

Jesus was tempted in the desert

Matthew 4. 1-11

Sunday 22 February

Many people, perhaps even most, will be aware that we are now in the season of Lent, if for no other reason than we've probably enjoyed our pancakes on Shrove Tuesday! Lent recalls the time when Jesus, following his baptism was led by the Spirit into the Judaeen wilderness, where he spent forty days and nights in fasting and prayer. It is during this period that he faced the reality of temptation, as he began his ministry, living out the reality of his being the Son of God.

Today, if any notice is taken of this important part of Jesus' life, it's usually associated with giving things up – chocolate, alcohol, sugar and the like. The little luxuries of life. Sometimes we think when we do these things that we're sharing in Jesus' sufferings, but that is not the purpose of Lent; we share in Jesus' sufferings after Lent, in the period we call 'Passiontide', from the Latin word, 'passio' meaning suffering. The point of Lent, is that, like Jesus, we confront our fears and the temptations that go with them, and deepen our relationship with God.

- Are you giving something up for Lent – why?
- What do you think Lent is about?
- Do you share those temptations that Jesus faced?
- How do you withstand temptation – or not?
- Who or what do you think 'the devil' is?

On first reading, the account of Jesus' temptations seems to be remote from our life and our experience. It seems something to be unique to him, and the prequel to his ministry in Galilee. But through practical, physical, examples lead to deeper, spiritual fears which at times we all share. By worrying about our bodies (having bread to eat) we can overlook the fact that God feeds us physically and spiritually. By putting God to the test, we demonstrate the doubt in our faith. By 'worshipping' things other than God, we are not putting God at the foremost of our being.

St Matthew paints a very dramatic and extreme picture of temptation as faced by Jesus, who like us was human, but unlike us was also fully divine. However, were we to look carefully at what the words mean, not just describe, we shall see that all the temptations that Christ faced are ones with which we identify, and the context may not be a desert, but often what has been described as 'the dark night of the soul'; periods when we are vulnerable, feel alone and afraid.

- What have been your 'dark nights of the soul'?
- How did you feel within them?
- What, or who, enabled you to get through them?
- Were you strengthened or weakened by these experiences?
- Did you really rely on God?

Lent is a time of growth. It comes from the word which means spring, the season which is coming to us. The three-fold disciplines of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, are not means by which we can inflict suffering on ourselves, but means by which we can grow in faith and our relationship with God. The word 'discipline' isn't to do with punishment. It is of the same root as 'disciple', learner. In Lent we can learn more about ourselves and more about God.