

Sunday Thought

6th March 2022 First Sunday in Lent

Readings

Deuteronomy 26: 1 - 11

Psalm 91: 1 - 2, 9 - 16

Romans 10: 8b - 13

Luke 4: 1 - 13

How to Rule the World

We may all have memories of glorious mountaintop experiences suddenly being dashed as we are plunged into dark times of pain, sorrow, doubt .. Our gospel reading shows us Jesus reaching a similar, almost world changing, point in his life. After thirty years of preparation, searching, questioning about his ministry and 'methods of mission' he knows everything is about to change. The Father's start time has arrived with his Son's baptism in the river Jordan. It was a stupendous moment of humility and glory. Jesus accepted baptism like everyone else and then saw the heavens open to release a dove, the sign of God's Spirit descending on him. Finally, a voice like distant thunder assured him of the Father's pleasure. God's great plan for him and the whole world, a plan prepared before its creation, was about to take off. Then, down to earth, the same spirit led him out into the rugged, mountainous desert to meet the devil - evil at source. There in the wild loneliness of strange, fearsome night noises he prayed and battled with choices about how to establish his universal Kingdom. He faced three issues which have confronted potentates in every generation.



In recent days, with Russia's conflict in Ukraine, we have witnessed one more leader with world-domination ambitions who has faced the same options as were put to Jesus - popularity, possessions, and power - and who, seemingly, has surrendered to the devil's choice. My thoughts today are about Jesus' responses, leaving you to make personal political allusions.

A forty day fast as a means of coming closer to God before making a personal decision was common practice. It still is, as we remember on this first Sunday in Lent. A complete fast can leave one with sharper mind and deep emotional challenges but also very weak physically. So, the first temptation is understandable. Evil always finds the weakest point. *'You're desperately hungry, but if you really are God's son you shared in the creation of everything. Turning stones into bread to satisfy your need should be no problem. It needn't stop there either. You could feed the whole hungry world and provide for every person's need. The world will flock to you.'*

I imagine Jesus' reply, 'And think of the problems that would cause! Would each person be content with their share? And the corruption of the greedy?! No! There is a much more basic human need than filling stomachs – the need for obedience to God's word – for compassion – to live by the commandments of love for him and our neighbours too...'

Undaunted, the tempter stays with dreams of wealth and glory. He prompts a flash vision of the world. *'I could give you more power and wealth than the world has ever seen, and all the world will worship you!'* Jesus counters, *'never forget the world's wealth is God's on loan to humanity. You may have some control at present, but it is not yours to give me, and never forget, worship, honour, love and service is for God alone.'* Anyone who has battled real temptation knows the devil is too desperate to give up easily! He came again to Jesus with grand schemes. *'Let the people fear you. Show them your glory. What about a stunt! Throw yourself from the highest pinnacle of the Temple and let them see you abseil on a battalion of angels' wings.'* Jesus responds, *'Give up. You know the scripture. Do not try to tempt God. You cannot win!'* Luke records that the devil did give up - just briefly. He kept niggling at Jesus for the next three years till the Cross sorted him out.

At the heart of Jesus' responses is the message, *'Satan, you have the idea of me as a man who wants to be God. You have it all wrong! My Kingdom is about God who has become a man, sharing all human life, even to the point of hunger and bloody crucifixion. It is not about mountain tops but about being nailed to a Cross in love for ALL people – ALL creation – making it new and right, as the Father and I designed it.'* In the reading, where Paul is writing to the church in Rome, he affirms that word 'ALL'. The Kingdom is for all people with no discrimination, like race or class. It is accepted and received by ALL in the one way which is possible for ALL ages and conditions – 'faith in Jesus as Lord and God'.

Finally, with that in mind Paul issues a challenge. *'Remember there are people who have not heard the gospel. We need messengers who will tell everyone the Kingdom truth and help prove the devil wrong.'*

A Prayer in time of danger (with Psalm 91 in mind)

(Pray it for ourselves and especially for the people of Ukraine and every other war-torn land)

Lord, you are my God. Give me courage to stay with you and hold on to my faith in you.

You have promised to keep us safe from unknown dangers and diseases.

You have promised to protect and defend us in the midst of violence and disaster

Give us confidence that you hear us as we pray to you and assurance that all heaven is on our side.

My God, hold me in your love. I will trust you, right to the end.

