

GENEROUS

LENT

Sample Sermon 1



WEEK ONE: SAMPLE SERMON GENEROUS LENT

FIRST READING:

Deuteronomy 8:1-14

SECOND READING

2 Corinthians 8:1-9

GOSPEL READING

Matthew 4:1-11

LENT: WAITING UPON GOD

We find ourselves close to the start of the forty days of Lent and reading a familiar and a challenging bible passage. Remember, Jesus has not begun his public ministry. No parables, no miracles, no crowds, no disciples. Before Jesus got busy doing things he invested time in prayer and fasting before God.

Lent invites us to press pause. To wait. But Lent is not about waiting for something to happen; treading water until Holy Week. Lent is about waiting upon God; waiting upon God to speak to us, encourage us, challenge us, to change us. Lent is not only about what we do as disciples, it is about who we are as disciples of Jesus.

Now, traditionally Lent is about three spiritual disciplines: a commitment to prayer, a commitment to fasting and, thirdly, a commitment to alms-giving or what we would call today, generous giving. Prayer we get. Fasting we get (or at least giving up chocolate!). But giving as a spiritual discipline: not so much. But it is. So today and next week we are thinking about living a Generous Lent and growing as generous disciples.

OPTIONAL STORY: A COMMITMENT TO COFFEE

Two coffee lovers, based in Dubai, have set out to brew the best coffee in the world, with an out of this world solution. The problem is that roasted coffee beans tumble around the roaster, getting scorched and splitting as they touch the hot floor and sides of the roaster.

The solution: build a small space rocket, put the coffee beans in a pressurised tank and send the rocket 200km above the earth's surface. There's no gravity so the beans float in their container and are roasted for 20 minutes by the heat of re-entry into earth's atmosphere. Back on earth the coffee would be brewed and sold, initially in Dubai – they didn't say how much a cup would cost! [1]

GENEROUS LENT

Two people will go to that cost and that much trouble to make a good cup of coffee. As followers of Jesus, are we prepared to give the best of all we are to be like Jesus? Are we prepared to give gladly of all that God has entrusted to us as generous disciples? Are we up for a Generous Lent?

[1] [www.theguardian.com/food/2019/jan/26/coffee-beans-perfect-roast-outer-space--rocket-science]

So, from our Gospel reading I want to look at the well-known story of Jesus being tempted in desert and explore three things:

- The Presence of God in the wilderness
- The Purpose of God in the wilderness
- The Priority of God in the wilderness

1. THE PRESENCE OF GOD IN THE WILDERNESS

The first thing and most important thing Matthew tells us is that the same Holy Spirit who settled on Jesus at his baptism now leads Jesus up into the wilderness above the Jordan valley. The devil only has a walk on part; just a few lines on stage.

It's the Spirit of God who comes upon Jesus at the rich, holy and spiritual experience of Baptism when Jesus hears the words, This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased (Mt 3:17). It's the same Spirit of God who takes Jesus up into the hard wilderness, a place of conflict and temptation – and takes him there for forty days.

Here's the thing. The wilderness is where Jesus is baptised by John and tempted by the devil. We cannot separate the waters of Baptism and the hunger and thirst of the desert. We cannot hear only God's words: You are my Child; we have to hear also God's silence. Baptism tells us who we are in Christ. The Temptations ask how we will live as Christians.

We can dig a little deeper here. First off, Luke's Gospel simply tells us Jesus was hungry; Matthew tells us that Jesus was fasting. It's one of our spiritual disciplines. Second, it's Matthew who tells us that Jesus is in the desert for forty days and forty nights. As Peter Kay would say, 'What's that all about?' The mostly Jewish Christians who heard Matthew's Gospel read to them knew their Bibles:

- Noah - forty days and nights of rain
- Moses - forty days and nights on Mount Sinai (Ex 34:28),
- Elijah - forty days and nights travelling to meet God at Mount Horeb (1Kgs 19:6).

In the Bible and in the history of the church the desert is the place where people do serious business with God. The hard place is the place of spiritual challenge and spiritual growth. That's how it was Moses, for Israel, for Elijah; and for Jesus. It is true also for us.

The times when God is silent, when life feels dry or barren – these are sacred, special times of spiritual growth. These are the times when the Spirit of God is very much present with us - even when it feels like God has gone AWOL and is very much absent. There is no short cut, no easy ride to mature Christian discipleship. Tough times are not God's absence but of his quiet presence.

That's why Lent is a discipline the Holy Spirit asks of us. We choose self-discipline. We choose to pray, read and learn. And we choose to think afresh about generous giving and generous living. Even when times are tough with a cost of living crisis or interest rates which hammer rents and mortgages, we choose to give generously. Because generosity is not just what we do as disciples. Generosity is who we are as those led by God's Spirit and caught up in God's love.

Generosity is a spiritual discipline so it can never be an optional extra; it can never be something only for the good times. It can be hard for some, we know. But the reading today is a promise of the presence of God with us, even in hard times or with tough choices. Whatever our personal wilderness is, whatever it feels like, the Spirit of God is with us, and leads us and sustains us. So, here's our first challenge as generous disciples:

- *Are we praying and thinking and asking God to lead us and be with us on our journey into generosity?*
- *Are we finding the help and support we need, talking with friends in church, in our small group, friends who travel this journey with us?*

Or when Lent ends, will we find ourselves thinking and doing the same as we've always done?



2. THE PURPOSE OF GOD IN THE WILDERNESS

The presence of God in the wilderness is the assurance that even in tough times God's Spirit is sustaining us and deepening our discipleship. So what is the *purpose* of God in the wilderness?

Each time Jesus is tempted by the devil he turns to Scripture, to the book of Deuteronomy. Here's what Deuteronomy chapter 8 has to say about God's purpose in the wilderness:

Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands.....Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you (Dt 8:2,5)

We use the traditional language of temptation but it's more helpful to speak of Jesus being tested in the wilderness. It's a different and a richer word. I think it helps to say that temptation is about trying to get someone to do the wrong thing. Testing is seeing if someone will choose to do the right thing.

God's purpose in the wilderness was not to punish Israel but to test Israel. God's purpose was to reveal to the people of Israel the attitudes of their hearts and the actions of their hands. And God does this because he loves them, because they are his people.

Here's the thing: in the Deuteronomy passages from which Jesus quotes (Dt 6 and Dt 8) the key test for Israel as they left the desert and went into the Promised Land was how to live with their wealth and possessions. As they gained silver and gold, as their flocks got bigger, as the trees bore rich fruit, as the land yielded many crops and the hills yielded rich minerals God tells the people not to forget: to forget that God brought them from Egypt, God brought them through the desert and God gifted them the land. The people are not to say in their heart: *My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me* (Dt 8:17)

The simple truth is that money and how we live with it is a huge part of our lives. So it makes sense that what we do with money is a vital part of our discipleship, of what it means to live as a Christian. We make money decisions every day. Some are small; some shape our whole lives. And some of our money decisions reveal our hearts to us. Here's a challenge from Fr John Dresko, a retired Orthodox priest in the States, written back in 2003:

"My gift to God is a genuine reflection of my heart. If I give \$400 per month to the bank on my car loan, but think the Church is fleecing me for \$20 per month, I have a heart problem. If I do my grocery shopping and write a check when I leave for \$100 so my family can be fed, but think \$20 per month is too much for the Bread of Life, I have a heart problem.

If I can go to the package store and drop \$20 for a bottle of liquor but gripe about the costs of sharing the Blood of Christ, I have a heart problem. If I cheat the Church out of regular giving by pleading about my "cash flow" while ignoring the fact that the Church has the same bills and the same "cash flow," I have a heart problem. [1]

So, here's a second challenge as we think about a Generous Lent:

- *What does my giving to God's work in our church reveal about the attitudes of my heart: to money, to my possessions, to resourcing our ministry and mission, to giving to God generously from all he has given to me?*

It's a tough question but that's what Lent is for.

3. THE PRIORITY OF GOD IN THE WILDERNESS

Finally, let's look briefly at each of the three temptations and a story may help

The Kalahari desert is hot and hunting there is hard, thirsty work. There is a shrub with a pint of water in the roots but it is hard to find without catching a monkey. For this you need a small vase tied to a handy tree and some rock salt. The monkey comes down for the salt in the jar and the hunter catches the monkey and feeds the rock salt until the monkey is thirsty and leads the hunter to the shrub.

Why does the monkey not run away? Because its paw is small enough to reach into the jar but with a handful of rock salt it is too large for the neck of the jar. The monkey is caught because it will not let go of the salt. [2]



[1] From a 2003 sermon on the Widow's Mite (Mark 12:41-44), no longer available. Permission to use is gratefully acknowledged.

[2] The story may be apocryphal or has grown in the telling. The southern Kalahari is classed as a desert; the northern portion receives much more rainfall but does not have surface water due to deep sands.



If we cannot let go of something we don't own it; it owns us. A cage may have golden bars but it is still a cage. The three temptations offered to Jesus are different but they have one thing in common. They invite Jesus to claim the gift of being God's son but without the obedience to his Father. Jesus is tested to see if he will put himself at the centre or live in obedience to his Father. And it's no accident that material things play a big part.

- The devil tempts Jesus to **provide for himself** instead of trusting God for what he needs by turning stones into bread. This test is all the more subtle for being so obvious. We need bread - and clothes and shelter and much, much more. But we have to receive these things as God's gift, receive them with gratitude.
- The devil tempts Jesus here to **presume for himself** by jumping from the roof of the Temple. When Jesus says, *you shall not test the Lord your God* (Dt 6:16) this refers to Israel grumbling at Moses because there is no water; it is about their material needs. They demand that God does something (Ex 17:1-7). So, here, the devil invites Jesus to force God's hand to protect him. Instead of God centred trust the devil invites Jesus to the presumption of self-centred living. The temptation invites Jesus not to hold life as a gift but to *lay claim to the gift* (PD Millar).
- Finally the devil invites Jesus to **promote himself**, offering Jesus the world's power and wealth if Jesus would only kneel and worship. It is a naked appeal to greed. It is an invitation to Jesus to claim for himself money and power and riches, the glory of the world - at the cost of his soul.[1] It's no accident that Jesus replies, get behind me Satan; the same words used when Peter suggests Jesus can be Messiah without the cross (Mt 16:23). [1]

[Now, the phrase 'fall down and worship' here is exactly what the Magi did, bringing gifts to the infant Jesus at the start of Matthews' Gospel. All authority in heaven and earth is give to Jesus at the end of Matthew's Gospel. The devil wants from Jesus the worship Jesus has already been given at his birth and offers the world's wealth to the one to whom God gives all authority - after the obedience of the cross.] [2]

So, here's a third and final challenge as we think about a Generous Lent:

- *Are we practising and growing in the spiritual discipline of generous giving?* Money has a gravitational pull on our lives. Money can capture our hearts. The single, most important thing we can do to be free is to give, generously and gladly as we trust in the God who gives us all things. Amen.

[1] *Provide, presume and promote* is an insight from an unknown source in the diocese of Liverpool and sadly cannot be credited

[2] In The Fellowship of the Ring the Lady Galadriel refuses to take the ring to right all wrongs becasue she would be devoured by its evil: all shall love me, and despair. www.youtube.com/watch?v=WeQDTjIUIIA

CONCLUSION

Without ever meaning to money can lead us to put ourselves at the centre of our lives: providing for ourselves, presuming for ourselves, promoting ourselves. We claim it all and lose our souls. Here's final thought.

We've seen the geographical maps of Israel with the Sea of Galilee in the north and the Dead Sea in the south. In Jesus day and today the Sea of Galilee is full of life. And the Dead Sea, is dead. Nothing lives in it; just bacteria. The reason is this. The Sea of Galilee receives water from the Jordan in the north and it gives water to the Jordan as it flows south. But the Dead Sea is below sea level; water goes in, but it cannot flow out. The Dead Sea receives but it does not give and so it holds no life.

A Generous Lent invites us to receive all God gives to us with joy and gratitude. A Generous Lent invites us to give generously of what has been given to us. When we give we refuse to be captured by wealth. When we give we refuse to worship mammon. When we give, we express our worship, our gratitude and our trust in the God who gives us all things. Amen.

