

Sermon on Thursday 26 February

Calton Court Holy Communion Service

by Rev. Bill Church

Reading: Matthew 4. 1-11

The Temptation of Christ

There are many different angles to the forty days and forty nights Jesus spent in the wilderness and his temptations there, which are told in all four Gospels.

Matthew's readers in particular would refer it back to the Old Testament. The children of Israel spent forty years wandering in the wilderness and were frequently found to be backsliding and complaining and following their own whims and fancies.

And right at the beginning, the first Adam was tempted by the evil one and succumbed, but the second Adam kept to a straight path and resisted all that the evil one tried on.

Another angle is to remember that the temptations followed immediately after his baptism by John the Baptist when the voice from heaven said, "This is my son", when perhaps Jesus first understood the power that was vested in him.

The time in the wilderness was then something like an ordination retreat, when he could ponder the shape and direction of his ministry and reflect on the powers that had been bestowed on him.

Note that all three temptations begin, "If you are the Son of God", trying to make Jesus doubt his role or prove it to himself by miracles.

Then ideas about how to misuse these powers came from the evil one.

Whether they came in the shape of an actual being - the devil of popular mythology - or in subtle whisperings in his mind, they pointed to comfort, fame and power.

Jesus refused to satisfy his own hunger by making bread out of stone.

His many recorded miracles were all about helping others, including providing bread, but none were for his own benefit or to hurt others.

Jesus refused to get instant fame by the gee-whiz stunt of leaping off the Temple and being rescued by angels.

During his ministry, Jesus constantly tried to avoid the adulation of crowds urging, not always successfully, that some beneficiaries of his miracles should keep silent, or trying to withdraw to a quiet place.

Jesus refused the offer to rule "all the kingdoms of the world" at the price of worshipping evil.

From time to time during his ministry, people tried to "make him king" or recruit him as a national liberation leader, but he refused.

He baffled Pilate with his statement that, "My kingdom is not of this world", and he never sought worldly power.

Those temptations were not specific to the first century Holy Land. They are alive and well and living in the twenty-first century.

To a greater or lesser extent all these three still beset mankind, including us to a greater or lesser extent - to use our talents and opportunities just for our own comfort or wealth, to show off or hope by a spectacular display to get fame and favour, or to seek power regardless of the means by which we get it.

And, finally, the temptations are an example to us of endurance, of not giving up at the first hurdle, of carrying on when things are tough, of putting up with hardship or inconvenience in pursuit of a just cause, of seeing things through to the end, when we hope that angels will look after us as they looked after Jesus.