

The Bridgwater Drive Church, 26 Feb. 2023

**Call to worship**

Unfailing love surrounds all those who trust in God.  
So rejoice and be glad,  
all you who love God!  
Sing and shout for joy,  
all you whose hearts are open!

**Hymn** Jesus lover of my soul R&S 332

**Gifts**

God of the wilderness,  
We give these offerings in gratitude,  
rejoicing in the abundance of your gifts to us.  
We give these offerings in faith,  
trusting that you will provide for our needs.  
We give these offerings in hope,  
knowing you can use them to spread your love in this world.  
And with these offerings, we give ourselves;  
May we live with generous hearts, with open hands. Amen

**Opening Prayer**

Our hearts are blessed as we gather before You today, O Lord,  
for you have given us freedom from all our sins and mistakes,  
and joy in exchange for heavy hearts.  
You are the refuge we seek when we are troubled  
and the courage we need when we venture into our days.  
Bless us today with Your steadfast love  
as we declare our trust in You. Amen

**Hymn** O Love how deep R&S 283 omit v 5&6

**Bible readings:**      **Psalm 32**  
                                 **Matthew 4:1-11**

Although January seems to go on forever; it feels like we've only just got over Christmas when Lent is upon us. Today is the first Sunday in Lent – the six weeks of reflection and for some people fasting, or giving things up, that lead up to Easter.

Tell story of dad's suitcase of sermons – one of the first ones is for Christmas – what new is there to say about Christmas. I feel a bit like, what new is there to say about Lent! You can do the taking something on, instead of giving something up, which seems to have now become such a popular theme that it is no longer original. But what else is there to say about the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness for 40 days. And how does it relate to us, here and now?

Jesus is led into the wilderness immediately after his baptism and confronted with options that address all the desires of a normal human: food, simplistic thinking, and power. It is almost as if he is sent on a retreat before taking on his ministry, his life's work; to make sure he is really doing God's will. This First Sunday in Lent moves away from the pious admonitions of Ash Wednesday - to do more giving, praying, and fasting. Even while we are

being exhorted during Lent to deepen our commitments to faithful living, Lent calls us to focus not on what we are doing, or not doing, but to focus on Jesus. The point in this text is not that we ought to take on the same fast as Jesus did in the wilderness, instead, a question is posed through the interaction between Jesus and the Tempter that gets at the question of Jesus' identity. The Tempter confronts Jesus with the opportunity to differentiate himself from what is not life-giving. By denying the goodies he could have, Jesus describes in a way who God is. In other words, what is truly life-giving resides inside certain boundaries. It doesn't feed itself at the expense of who it knows. What gives true life does not take a short-cut to wisdom by taking Scripture literally, and it doesn't grasp for power. Last time I was here, I spoke about choosing life – choosing what is life-giving, and I'll come back to that. Jesus' denials, of the things that all of us want, at least sometimes, presents a model of how we are to live our lives – it is not as simple as giving something up, or taking something on for the six weeks of Lent and then going back to how we usually do things. On one level the temptation is a story about Jesus similar to stories of other religious leaders in antiquity, who faced struggles early in their lives and prevailed. At Jesus' baptism, God confirmed him as the person who would lead a movement towards transformation and the Kingdom of God. Jesus' performance in the wilderness shows that he is trustworthy because, empowered by the Spirit, he faced temptation and remained faithful.

The early twenty-first century is an age full of untrustworthy leaders. We might think of Trump, Putin, Truss, even Rishi Sunak – while we might not view him as untrustworthy, as one of the richest men in the UK how can he relate to the majority of the people he is supposed to represent? Has he not already given in to the temptation of power? How do these leaders compare with someone like Jacinda Ardern, the compassionate leader of New Zealand who knew how and when to leave gracefully. Or even Nicola Sturgeon – regardless of whether you agree with her views or not, she was a more reliable leader during the pandemic than her English counterparts and she knew when to call it quits. The Roman Empire is in the background for all the temptations of Christ, but in particular of the third temptation. The Tempter offers Jesus the leadership of a world whose social structure is a rigid social pyramid with the rich and privileged controlling the resources while repressing the many people in the middle and at the bottom of the pyramid. Rome, like other empires, created idols in its own images to justify its controlling social power. Take a look at our current and most recent government – the majority extremely wealthy, and including liars and tax avoiders. Our society is not so much different from that ancient Roman Empire. Last week in Rayleigh, on Church Action for Poverty Sunday, we looked at

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the huge disparity between the rich and the poor in this country. We live in a society, where energy companies and their shareholders make billions, while the vulnerable can't afford to put their heating on, or have gas companies breaking into their houses to install pre-payment meters.

For the people Matthew was writing his Gospel for, the temptation was to ease one of the tensions in their lives by just going along with the Empire and its idolatry and exploitative behaviours. Is that not a temptation for us too? How many of us speak up about the cost-of-living crisis? How many of us speak up about the mistreatment of refugees? How many of us speak up about the gradual erosion of our right to protest? This week I received the monthly newsletter from the Joint Public Issues Team – the Methodist, Baptist and URC Group which works on issues of social justice. This is the opening paragraph:

Lent begins this week. It feels strange to be entering a season that is focussed on stripping back and going without when so many are struggling to afford the basic necessities of life. Over the past few weeks, reports have shown fossil fuel companies such as BP and Shell reporting record profits, whilst fuel vouchers go unclaimed by those who need them most. The stark contrast between those barely managing to stay afloat during the cost-of-living crisis and rising profits should challenge us, particularly as we consider how we can focus on God in this Lenten season. How might the resources we benefit from every day be tools for building a fairer and more just world? What do we have that could be used to challenge how the system seems to benefit some, whilst leaving others behind? As we journey through the desert and towards resurrection light, how might our actions be driven by God's promise of new life emerging from the wilderness?

Jesus sees through the attempted traps of the devil. He will not let the Tempter make him give up his sense of self as the Son of God for the sake of assuaging his physical desires, his hunger. He will not let the Tempter narrow his understanding of God's word so that it becomes a litmus test for faith. He will not grab influence in the way of human beings who find themselves unsatisfied unless they have status that is admired by other humans.

Through the story of Jesus' denial of these very human temptations, Matthew presents a different model of living. A way of choosing life, of working for what makes life possible - for oneself and for others and the community as a whole.

If you think, this is all well and good, but we are too old, we're too tired, we're too busy being ill or caring for others who are ill, I give you another example from this book – Inciting Joy. p108 – community orchard

**Hymn** How sweet the name of Jesus sounds R&S 277

### **Prayers of intercession**

Most Holy Friend, your goodness always tests our readiness to receive it, please increase our eagerness for you and enlarge our ability to share your love around.

Gracious God, steer us through times of temptation,  
And deliver us from evil.

On this Sunday in Lent we think of those who are being acutely tempted:  
tempted to look the other way when wrong is happening around them;  
tempted to misuse their gifts for sordid purposes;  
tempted to allow untamed emotions to hold sway;  
tempted by the corrupting power of money;  
and those tempted to stay in a rut rather than strike out on new paths.

Generous God, steer us through times of temptation,  
And deliver us from evil.

We pray also for the many who feel pushed and tested almost beyond their endurance;  
those in positions of heavy responsibility who feel overloaded to the point of collapse;  
or those pressured from all sides by factions in workplace or community;  
suffering people—and all who must watch a loved one suffer— who feel they can bear no more; kindly folk whose patience with a difficult friend is now at breaking point;  
persecuted Christians whose faith seems stretched beyond their limit;  
and the depressed whose inner being endures a misery which no human word can alleviate.

Merciful God, steer us through times of temptation,  
And deliver us from evil.

We also pray for those who seem to be in a position of advantage:  
the happy, that their happiness may always be used for goodwill and compassion;  
the strong, that their energies may be used wisely and gently;  
the clever, that they may employ their mental facility for good not evil;  
for the rich, that their wealth may be shared for the uplifting of the poor;  
for the powerful, that they may use their position as a blessing to humanity;  
and those of strong faith, that they may walk humbly and affirm the weaker souls.

Righteous God, steer us through times of temptation,  
And deliver us from evil.

Ukraine – 1 yr, earthquakes

And now most Holy Friend, we pray for each other in this church. None of us know the extent of the pressures that some may be under this day. Look upon us all, read our thoughts and weigh our feelings, and by your utter resourcefulness, “save us in the time of trial and deliver us from all evil.” Through Christ Jesus our Saviour. Amen

### **Lord's Prayer**

**Hymn** Take up your cross MP 935 omit v 3 & 6

### **Blessing**

Go now into Lent, and live in the spirit of your baptism,  
even when you are led into wild and hard places.  
With repentance and trust, give yourselves to God,  
and with fasting and prayer,  
strengthen yourselves against the ways of temptation.

And may God enfold you in tender and lasting love.  
May Christ be beside you in times of struggle.  
And may the Spirit guide you back to the path whenever you stray.

The Bridgwater Drive Church sung Blessing