

Luke 4.1-15 Lent 1 Overcoming in the wilderness.

Lent is a time when we are encouraged to look within: to turn from anything we find that is coming between us and God; to shed those things that hinder us from serving him, and to draw closer to God in love and obedience. Our readings over the next 6 weeks help us to do that. This morning, we look at the ever present struggle with temptation.

I remember when Micah first moved to Sydney to start his degree. When we dropped him off at his digs, he was in such high spirits! He'd enrolled in a bachelor of Dramatic Art, and on the first day, he was offered leading roles in two productions the college was doing. (probably because he is the only guy in his year!) He felt really good. But within a few days, he'd started to plunge. He'd begun to miss his girl and his mates. The house he was in was pretty tacky with crook plumbing, grubby walls and stained furniture. His room was tiny, his bed too small, and he was having transport problems. He wasn't easily able to get to the shops to buy food – and had been living on cheese sandwiches! So he went from the mountain to the valley in his first couple of weeks!

Life is full of mountains and valleys, and when we're in the valley or the wilderness, we are very vulnerable to temptation. It's not always obvious. It sneaks up on us. It's easy to become focused on our own hardship and discontent, and bit by bit we can lose sight of God, who is always there, no matter how bad we feel.

Today's Gospel reading is all about overcoming. It's about winning over temptation, which so often comes to us when we feel least able to deal with it.

Generally, it's not the major temptations that we have problems with. Not many Christians end up in gaol convicted of murder, rape, burglary and the like. (though sadly I have known a couple of Christians who have committed major crimes) On the whole, we can resist the big ones.

It's the more subtle temptations we have problems with - and we'll find in this reading, that the temptations the devil put before Jesus, are temptations he puts before us as well.

Jesus' encounter with temptation followed his baptism, which would have been a really heady experience for him - a great spiritual 'high'. But then we read this: **“Jesus returned from the Jordan full of the Holy Spirit and was led by the Spirit into the desert, where he was tempted by the Devil for forty days. In all that time he ate nothing, so that he was hungry when it was over.”**

Jesus was led into the desert. Actually the word in the Greek is more like “drove” than led. Jesus was compelled to go into the desert. No doubt he was looking for solitude to commune with God – but instead, all hell broke loose – literally. The

devil showed up in person, and began to chip away at the things that were central to what Jesus believed about his Father, as well as what he believed about himself.

The first temptation was to turn the stones into bread.

Jesus had been fasting and praying for 40 days. He would have been weak, hungry and probably dehydrated. Of course the devil targeted him where he was weakest. “Why don’t you turn these stones into bread?” wheedled Satan. In other words, you’ve been out here for 40 days without food. Who’s looking after you? God certainly isn’t! You need to fend for yourself! You can do it!”

The temptation was for Jesus to **doubt God’s goodness and provision**; to give in to a sense of insecurity and to take matters into his own hands, using the power of the Spirit within him to meet his own needs.

How often are we tempted to doubt God’s goodness and provision? Think about that. Our initial reaction may be, “I never doubt God’s goodness and provision.” But... do we ever worry about anything? Do we turn things over and over in our minds, looking for a solution; hoping something will or won’t happen? Do we ever ever get anxious about things? I’d venture to say, that these are almost universal human experiences. And at their root, is a lack of confidence in the goodness of God.

How did Jesus combat this temptation? He kept his focus on God. He quoted a verse from Deuteronomy. “**Man does not live by bread alone**” - the rest of that verse being, “**but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.**” This verse shouted to the devil that God was the source of all provision. Jesus hung on to that, reminding himself and Satan of God’s sufficiency - and we read later that God did indeed meet his needs.

We are reminded in Scripture not to worry, or to be anxious about anything. Instead we are to pray and give thanks. Jesus himself taught that as we seek God first in all things, he will provide what we need.

The second temptation was to entice Jesus to take his eyes off God and worship riches & power. Jesus was taken up to the top of a mountain and shown all the nations of the world. Jesus was God’s Messiah-King, but the road ahead did not offer riches and power – it offered pain and sacrifice. So the devil offered Jesus something more immediate and attractive – all the kingdoms of the world!

So often we are tempted to allow the things of this world to take precedence over God. These things may be riches or power, but more often they are more subtle. It could be busyness, or it could be apathy. It’s the pursuit of things we want, rather than the things we need. It can be the demands of other people, or the tyranny of overcommitment; or it could be the lure of leisure. We can end up being so caught up in the things that fill our everyday life, that we just give God the left-overs.

Again, Jesus overcame this temptation by focusing on God. He flung the first commandment in the devil's face, - we are to worship God alone!

The third temptation was to doubt God's wisdom. Jesus was taken to the top of the Temple. The suggestion was that Jesus should do something spectacular – he should leap off the top of the temple 50 or so storeys up – and trust the angels to catch him! Better than bungie-jumping! That would get the people's attention, now wouldn't it? It would prove to the crowds below – and to Jesus himself, that he was God's son. The inference was that God wasn't going about things the right way; that there was a much better plan than God's.

We also can be tempted to doubt God's wisdom; perhaps to question or rail against our lot in life; or to leave God at arm's length in our decisions, in case he asks us to do something we'd rather not do. If we truly call Jesus 'Lord' of our lives, then we need to kneel at his feet, willing to do things his way and in his time, trusting that he knows best.

Jesus resisted the temptation by quoting again from the book of Deuteronomy, that we are not to 'test' the Lord our God.

In this context, when Jesus said we're not to test God, what he meant was that we shouldn't try to manipulate him, which is what the devil was suggesting Jesus do.

Jesus overcame this temptation by being faithful to God. He would not try to manipulate God or force his hand to suit himself!

All three temptations sought to bring Jesus to a point where he stopped trusting God, and instead, trusted in himself and his own wisdom.

There is a simple strategy here.

- 1.) We identify the temptation
- 2.) We say no.

The Scriptures are a powerful weapon to help us do this. Paul called them the Sword of the Spirit - and a sword can both defend and attack. Jesus overcame this temptation, by reminding himself – and the devil – that it is God who is pre-eminent. Our task is to trust God, not to try and manipulate him, and to put him first in all things.

In Ephesians chapter 6, when Paul is talking about how to stand against the devil, he tells us to arm ourselves with the Sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. So it is really important that we read it, and learn it, so that the Spirit can bring it to our minds when we need an offensive weapon like Jesus did.

Following Jesus' example can help us overcome the difficulties of our own wilderness or valley. Like Jesus, we too can be overcomers, as we turn our hearts back to God in trust. We can be confident that he will love us, sustain us, and fulfil his purpose in us, as he did in Jesus.

When Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, they had some pretty fierce trials to overcome. Let me close with his words of encouragement to them He said, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. "

Let's pray.