C - Lent 1

Deut 26.1-11

Ps 91.1-2, 9-16

Rom 10.4-13

Luke 4.1-15 Jesus faces temptations in the wilderness

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Today’s gospel story is not entirely as it seems. There’s more to it than simply a straight forward, eye-witness account of an incident in the desert involving Jesus.

You can see in it elements of the classic pattern of male initiation found in many cultures. The candidate faces a period of trial and testing, culminating in coming face to face with death, and emerging with a new sense of identity and purpose.

The story itself is constructed to be a commentary and interpretation of part of the Hebrew scriptures, part of the book of Deuteronomy in fact. In chapters 6-8 of Deuteronomy the ancient people of Israel are tempted to disregard their identity as God’s people and to avoid their destiny.

In today’s passage from Luke, Jesus faces precisely the same temptations. But where Israel failed, Jesus remains faithful.

The first temptation is to turn stones into bread. Do you remember the story of Israel in the wilderness after God had rescued them from slavery in Egypt by the hand of Moses? The Israelites became hungry in the desert and turned on Moses (Ex 16). They complain they would’ve been better off if they’d stayed in Egypt. Their hunger is one thing but their grumbling reflects a deeper lack of trust in God. Jesus quotes the words from Deuteronomy (8.2-3) which recall this testing of Israel: ‘he afflicted you with hunger and then fed you on manna … to teach you that people cannot live on bread alone, but that they live on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.’

The first temptation, both for Israel and for Jesus, was really to do with doubting their vocation as the son of God. In this passage from Luke the tempter says twice ‘If you are the son of God …’

And this is the basic temptation faced by us and the church too. We doubt that we are God’s sons and daughters. Until we know and trust our basic identity in God we can’t get on with our mission. We’ll keep concentrating on bread, not believing that we have anything valuable and important to offer people at a deeper level. We’ll overlook the truth that the most profound thing we can do is to recall people to their radical dignity as children of God.

Where Israel failed and where we are tempted, Jesus was faithful. He discerned and trusted that his identity was as son of God and that at the deepest level he was loved by God.

The second temptation was to have the power and glory of all the kingdoms of the world. The ancient people of Israel knew that they had one God and that they were not to go after the other gods (Deut 6.13-14) of the peoples round about them. But Exodus and other parts of the scriptures tell us that Israel ‘played the harlot’ with other gods. Sometimes this was brought about by the need to do deals with those around them in politics and business.

At a deeper level the temptation is to do with doubting that the kingdom of God is really here. Like the ancient Israelites we are more often than not overwhelmed or at least subsumed by the apparent kingdoms of business and property and money and media. We’re tempted to think that that’s reality. It’s difficult to see beyond all that to discern the presence of God and the power of the Spirit. Until and unless we can begin to see the transcendent within the kingdoms of the world, unless we can begin to see God and see that God is winning the battle, we will succumb in the same way as did our ancestors.

Jesus discerned the reality of the kingdom of God. ‘It’s here,’ he said on numerous occasions. ‘It’s among you. Can’t you see it?’ The Kingdom of God is at hand. Believe!’ Jesus saw and believed and trusted in the power of the Spirit when most about him didn’t.

The third temptation invited Jesus to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple to test whether God would save him.

Again it echoes the story of the Exodus. After the people had left Egypt they were in the desert a long time. They were thirsty as well as hungry and began to doubt this dream that God would provide for them and lead them to the promised land (Ex 17.1-7). So they decided to test whether God was with them or not. Moses struck the rock and water gushed out. The failure was succumbing to the desire for proof that God was with them.

Isn’t that a basic temptation we feel too? Don’t we doubt that God is with us, that God cares, that God can or will do anything?

And any signs and wonders that would remove that doubt, that would prove God is with us and cares – don’t actually work.

Two people can see a miracle. The one with faith will praise God for it and the one without faith will find some other way to explain it away as something else.

See, faith involves seeing in a particular way, seeing God and taking the risk of believing it’s true.

Jesus saw and took the risk and plumbed the depths of steadfast hope and love and fidelity. He discovered the power and truth of these things in his life as he risked living as if they were true. Israel, on the other hand, doubted and demanded proof and sacrificed the very possibility of faith and hope and love.

Now at first sight this gospel doesn’t appear to have much direct relevance to us. After all we don’t usually have conversations with a visible devil. Nor do we tend to be whisked around from place to place and be perched precariously in exotic, life-threatening positions.

On the face of it we could be forgiven for thinking that the sort of temptations Jesus faced are nothing like ours. What did Jesus know of the temptations faced each day by a recovering alcoholic or drug user? What did Jesus know of the pressures on a lonely divorcee? Jesus never struggled to run a business! And as far as we know he never went through the trauma of being a teenager desperate to be accepted by his peers.

On the face of it.

But at a deeper level the passage identifies three fundamental doubts that the people of God have faced since time began:

first, to doubt that we actually are children of God and that our basic identity and dignity and value and worth are discovered in relation to God ;

second to doubt that the kingdom of God is real and to think that all there is money, property and politics;

and third to doubt that God cares and can and will act in the world through us.

Israel faced these temptations and succumbed to the doubts. Jesus faced them too but remained faithful.

We can’t avoid them ourselves. The same basic doubts present themselves to us in many different ways every day. But we also know what Jesus has done before us and of the effects his faith wrought in his own life and the lives of those around him. We also know of God’s vindication of his life. But more than knowledge, we actually are in communion with this same Jesus. The Spirit which animated him also animates us. We live in him and he lives in us.

Just as the Spirit in the wilderness launched Jesus on a radical path, so the Spirit sets us on radically new paths. When the Spirit comes to us we are changed, faced in a new direction on a different path, given a new identity and purpose, worth and dignity – declared to be a beloved child of God and a person through whom God will work to bring the kingdom into being. We are sent to believe it, live it, and tell it’s truth for every person.

This Lent will you take seriously this new creation God is bringing to birth in you and through you?

Will you take yourself more seriously as a beloved child of God on whom God depends? Like most Australians need to will you look after yourself better than you have in the past for God’s sake: lose weight, exercise more, drink less? Will you take God’s creation more seriously – waste less, live more simply, reduce energy use? Will you take relationships more seriously – forgive, let go of grudges, give up on revenge, trust the power of generosity and grace? Will you take compassion more seriously – suffering with another person and never abandoning them? Will you take community and society more seriously and work for justice and fairness and to include those pushed to the edges?

Will you renew your trust that the kingdom is real and coming? That the new creation God began in Jesus God continues to bring into being through his Spirit transforming us. Will you be in it? I pray so.

Amen.