

Three Challenges

This sermon has to be about Ukraine today! It has dominated our lives over the last two weeks.

But what does our Scripture readings say today about the situation?

It challenges us all in three ways...

Have we turned stones into bread?

In other words, have we put ease before sacrifice?

Have we bowed down to the god of this world?

In other words, have we exchanged the spiritual for the material?

Have we tested God?

In other words, pushed him to the limit!

On this first Sunday of Lent, we again engage with Jesus who was challenged with those three temptations or more accurately tests!

When I was beginning my studies for the ministry, I remember speaking to a minister from the United Reformed Church, and he said, *"If you are going to be a minister be prepared to be tested in every way; There is not a part of your life that will not be tested"* and 30 years on from that conversation, his words have remained with me; *"There is not a part of your life that will not be tested."*

I could go round the congregation today, and I guarantee that everyone could tell me of a time of testing, a time when you have gone through the mill or the wringer...perhaps you are going through this time right now.

Jesus had to go through his time of testing and that is what Lent is about – taking time to reflect upon Jesus's time of testing, and to be asking ourselves the question, where are we on the Christian journey?

How do we measure against the three great tests of Jesus?

On Friday, I attended the funeral service of Sue Cobb, at St James the Less Church, it was said that Sue was a woman of faith, a woman whose faith shone from her. We heard of her love for her Lord and her commitment to social justice; we heard about her joy even in the midst of her personal suffering. Her daughter said, "Mum was not perfect but she was close to it!"

Sue's service spoke to me of the cost of discipleship. Sue was severely tested but her joy remained constant. Many will remember her working at the coffee shop, with a smile on her face, behind the till on her wheelchair.

This war asks the questions about discipleship, just as it asked the question to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, during the Second World War; a German theologian and pastor who stood up to the Nazi regime and paid the ultimate price in a German prison in 1945.

This week, I was reflecting upon his great book the Cost of Discipleship and the words, "Only the person who is dead to their own will can follow Christ."

Is Christianity real? It certainly was to this man!

Lent begins with Jesus withdrawing to the wilderness to enter into a battle.

He is alone, very alone as far as human company is concerned. The landscape of the Jordan desert is devastation. The hills are like dust heaps, the limestone looks blistered and peeling; the rocks are bare and jagged, it was in this awesome devastation that Jesus was to face his first great test.

40 days in the desert and he faces the tempter. What was he doing during these 40 days?

40 days of fasting, 40 days of prayer, 40 days of listening for God's word.

Then he faces his first temptation.

Turn stones into bread?

In other words, choose the easy way.

What was the Devil saying to him? *"You don't need to do this. Life can be so much easier for you, just give up now and take the path of ease. If you are the Son of God you can turn these stones into food."*

The first challenge to our discipleship as followers of Christ.

Take the easy way?

We are all shocked by what we have seen unfolding before our eyes. I'm sure that we've all prayed at some point that this would never happen in Europe. Our Remembrance services each year are reminders of the horrors of the wars of the past to ensure that we never go down this road again and yet! Let us remember to pray for all who are being tested at this time. Pray for Christians in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus that they would remain faithful to their Lord, just like Bonhoeffer at this time.

Jesus knew that war begins in the human heart. That's what we are seeing in Jesus' testing. He is making choices. He is choosing life and not death. He is choosing the way of service and humility and the way of peace.

Behind the physical battle there is a spiritual battle. What we see on our TVs is only half the story, there are spiritual forces at work behind the scenes. There are spiritual forces at work in Russia. President Zelensky said to his nation yesterday, *"You must drive this evil out!"*

Satan is known as the prince of this world always wanting to overthrow the Prince of Peace and this running battle was to be a constant in Jesus' life.

Satan had already ruined paradise in the Garden of Eden, why shouldn't he ruin the Kingdom of God?

So, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he tests him

Turn those stones into bread!

So, the voice spoke into the depth of his hunger.

But the real challenge was over his calling as the Son of God.

This was his first big test and if Jesus gave in here, then everything would have been so much different.

His victory on the cross was won here!

It's a temptation that we all will face at some time, choose the easy way, just change these stones for bread.

Jesus recognised the voice. It's a voice that has been around since Creation, since the first people, did God really say that you can't eat from this tree. Look at the fruit, it's pleasing to the eye. Take and eat.

Yes, Jesus knew who was behind the voice and he speaks directly to the voice, *"Man does not live on bread alone."* There is more to life than the stomach, there is more to life than feeding our ease. Man has a spiritual life, and that spiritual life is of the utmost importance and the spiritual life needs to be fed continually. He was to say at a later date, *"Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and everything else shall be added."*

The greatest battles that we will ever face are often in our heads and between our ears. That is where the battle will rage loudest. There are stories of monks who think that if they escape from the demands of the world, they will escape from the challenges that they are facing, only to find that the battle is louder in the desert.

That's where the fight is at its greatest.

We will all have engaged with these battles, perhaps on a daily basis - like two wolves battling for control. The one that wins is the one we feed.

Fiona Hafverstein, is the wife of Joel, who was the former United Mission to Nepal Chief Executive, she recently wrote in UNM Christmas magazine. She spoke of her personal battle.

"My greatest fear in coming into this role in Nepal was bringing our young children into a place of high earthquake risk. I don't believe that in general God promises us physical safety—although he can and sometimes does do that. His word to me was that he promised to be gentle with me, even if the circumstances were not gentle.

Moving away from home and family to Nepal with young children was not gentle, the pandemic is not gentle, being kicked out of Nepal was not gentle. But he has been gentle with me."

She speaks of this as a time of testing but she discovered also the gentleness of God in her time of testing. Something which Bonhoeffer could also relate to.

As soon as Jesus had conquered this temptation, the Devil was to assault him again, and this time he was taken to a high point and shown the kingdoms of the world, he saw their magnificent splendour. He saw the power and opulence and as the Devil feasts Jesus' eyes on such amazing

beauty, he also seductively whispers into his ear, *"I will give you all the authority and splendour for it has been given to me and I can give it to anyone I want. So, if you worship me, it will be yours."*

How many leaders have been seduced by this temptation? How many leaders have been lifted high and shown the wealth and power of the world, and their lust to take them over; that's what we are seeing today?

Russia is already the largest country in the world, and still he wants more. He sees the opulence in Ukraine. He sees the productivity of Ukraine. He wants them to bow down to him and be subject to him.

Jesus saw through this temptation, *worship the Lord your God and serve him only*. His eye was fixed totally on God.

The talk is not over, the inner chat continues, he comes and takes him to the temple, almost suggesting, that if you know that much about God, jump from the top of it and he will send his angels to save you. But Jesus tells the Devil, *"Don't test God"*. His relationship was such that he trusted God in the midst of his tests.

Again and again, Jesus chooses the path of humble obedience. This is the path of trust in God over the security of meeting the world's expectations. But even more than that, this is the path which makes the work of justice possible.

It is in the humbling wilderness that Jesus prepares to announce good news to the poor. Freedom for the oppressed. The year of the Lord's favour.

Are we putting God to the test in this present situation? Is the Russian leader taking the world to a cliff face and calling us to jump and the angels might catch us? Time will tell, but Jesus calls us to trust in the faithfulness of God and that we don't need to test him.

So, today I leave these three challenges for discipleship with us all.

Have we turned stones into bread?

In other words, have we put ease before sacrifice?

Have we bowed down to the god of this world?

In other words, have we exchanged the spiritual for the material?

Have we tested God?

In other words, pushed him beyond the limit!

May the God of Peace grant us peace

As we journey with Him through this painful war

And we journey through Lent to the Cross and Resurrection.

Amen