

Sermon for 5.3.17

Today we enter the time in Matthews's gospel narrative after Jesus baptism, when he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

The wilderness in biblical language is symbolic of chaos and formlessness. The imagery conjures up a geographical place yet "the wilderness, can also refer to a state of being within.

In the gospel passage each of the temptations that confront Jesus have one common foundational target- and that is, God's love.

Each one tempts Jesus to deny the great love that he has for Abba Father. They tempt him to deny the great commandment in Deuteronomy – to love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

The theme of love holds the passage together and wins the battle that takes place.

Let's have a look at the temptations:

The first one is about Jesus showing his powers by turning stones into bread. This would involve rebelling against God's design in the creation and therefore the will of God. Jesus response is that the word of God is the chief nourishment.

*One does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*

The second temptation is to prove that the angels will indeed save him if he were to throw himself down from the pinnacle.

Jesus answer is that one must serve the lord with all one's life but not lightly. "do not put the Lord your God to the test."

And the third temptation is in the offering of worldly power and wealth.

Jesus' answer is that he does not prefer power and wealth to the covenantal love of God.

*"Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.*

Jesus does not yield to temptation and remains totally true to the reality that he lives within the perfect love of God. Nothing else comes before his love for God and all his actions and words come from that love.

Jesus response to temptation is in stark contrast to the profound and abiding relevance in the narrative in genesis in which temptation is responded to by self centered love, which in effect speaks about self-focus, self-satisfaction, reliance, and dependence.

Paul writes about the effect of this in his letter to the Romans, "therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all."

By tradition in the early church – and in the contemporary church - the 40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness fasting and praying, became a model for Christians to enter their own period of preparation before receiving the newness of life at Easter.

It was and is for some a time to prepare for baptism for others a way to renew their sense of commitment and love for God and each other.

And so today, the first Sunday in lent, many of us have begun our time of fasting and prayer in reflection on the wilderness within our own being - and the salvific way of perfect love in Christ.

For some it is a strict time of facing up to inner distortions with sternness and even self-loathing.

Hence I believe at such a time it might be helpful to keep in mind the words of the 16C mystic, Terese of Avila. She wrote that when the Lord speaks, the words are accompanied by effects... they prepare the soul and make it ready and move it to tenderness, give it light and make it happy and tranquil.

During this Lenten season may we dwell upon these terms of tenderness, light, happiness and tranquillity as we enter a deeper knowing of ourselves and spring clean our spiritual lives.

May we live in the reality that Lent is about coming into who we are in the tender love of Christ. It is not about self damnation.

It is about being open to receive from perfect love, our transformation that comes only from the Grace of perfect love.

Last Wednesday during the service for Ash Wednesday, we sang the hymn *Lord Jesus think on me*. This hymn was written in the fourth century and its relevance is timeless.

Perhaps this lent we might like to try simply dwelling and resting in the words from the first line of the hymn, as we sit with God.

*Lord Jesus think on me* – and in this reflective time be open to the grace of God in our hearts.

The Lord be with you.

