

The Temptations of Jesus

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 9 March 2025

A Reflection by Rev Lionel Robson

Lent 1C

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11; Romans 10: 8-13; Luke 4: 1-13

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Today is the first Sunday in Lent 2025.

The season of Lent that began on Ash Wednesday leads us to holy week and Easter. It is a season that grows in intensity as we join in the events that lead to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

On Ash Wednesday we are marked with ash. Like bread, wine, water used in services, ash too is a powerful symbol reminding us that we are dust. As we say in the funeral liturgy: Ash to ashes, dust to dust.

We are reminded of our creatureliness and our dependence on God as giver, sustainer of life.

Who makes anything out of dust? God does, as only God can. God makes whole worlds out of dust.

Life is fleeting and our hopes and dreams can sometimes turn to ashes. That is not a gloomy or unhealthy view. Such experiences encourage us to keep living our lives in the direction of God.

Lent is always introduced on the first Sunday by retelling the story of the temptations of Jesus. These temptations are important because they are recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Mark tells of the temptations in only 2 verses, whereas Luke has 13 verses. His is the most comprehensive account.

How do we know about these temptations since Jesus was the only one there? The only explanation for the gospels recording this important and powerful event must come from Jesus himself.

Jesus was in the wilderness 40 days and nights where he was confronted by powerful temptations.

Significantly the period is 40 days. For example, Noah spent 40 days in the ark; Moses and the Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness after their liberation from Egypt; Elijah broken and dejected was in the wilderness 40 days. 40 is symbolically a time of testing and preparation, a time to trust in God's faithfulness and provision. The story of the temptations of Jesus is mapped over this idea of 40 which is so common in the Hebrew scriptures.

Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days and nights. This mirrors the story of Moses and the Israelites who spent 40 years in the wilderness after their liberation from the Egyptians.

The Israelites were tested by Yahweh with the goal of bringing them to trust and faithfulness. This was a test of the people of God and of God, too.

The supplementary reading from Deuteronomy is a moving account of Israel's history beginning with a wandering Aramean. This wandering is in and through the landscape of wilderness. Land is fundamental to the Jewish people as it is to aboriginal people and it is significant that Jesus is located in the wilderness.

Both the twin themes of Jesus baptism and temptations are linked together by being located in the wilderness. Wilderness refers to a rocky, daunting place of caves, cliffs, a place of wild animals; a place to be avoided because people believed demons and evil spirits roamed there as well as criminals.

In the setting of the temptations in the gospels, we see a new and higher level of negativity in attitudes towards the wilderness. Here, wilderness is clearly associated with evil, since it comes to be seen as the haunt of the devil.

In the case of Jesus, the temptations are internalised into the alienated and alienating figure of the devil. Devil acts against his victims' welfare – the aim being not to discipline or correct, but to lead astray and destroy.

At his baptism, Jesus heard the one voice that matters. Now another voice comes and tries to tempt him away from his work of ministry. The gospel of Luke is about voices trying to derail Jesus' mission. Successfully, it seems, with only a few people present at the foot of the cross.

As we look at the situation of the church across the west, which includes Australia, we still see too few people at the foot of the cross.

In thinking about the apparent failure of Jesus to attract followers, we remember the figure of the Grand Inquisitor, who seems to be Dostoyevsky's version of the devil in his novel *The Brothers Karamazov*.

In this stunning work, we are told that Christ revisits the earth coming to Seville in Spain at the height of the Inquisition. He is arrested by the sadistic Grand Inquisitor who delights in ridiculing Jesus and telling him that only a feeble version of his teaching now exists. This feeble version is administered by the Grand Inquisitor. His point was, or is: *if anyone wants followers then they must fashion an ideology that any fool can follow*.

Bonhoeffer dealt with this enfeeblement of faith in his powerful discussion of cheap grace in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*. This cheap grace was promoted by the protestant churches in 19th and 20th century Germany. This diluted and moth-eaten faith asked nothing of the people yet it helped to open the door to the Nazis and the destruction that they wrought.

Bonhoeffer remained true to the call of Jesus by naming the evils of Nazism, and it cost him his life.

The Grand Inquisitor was dedicated to making sure, even certain, that no one set foot on the road less travelled, the way of Jesus that leads to the cross and the resurrection.

Lent invites us to go down the road less travelled and to move more deeply into the story of Jesus' own journey.

This is my lent, and this is your lent. You can't do my lent for me nor can I do your lent for you.

Yet, as a community of faith we can participate in lent together. We have significant resources available to us.

Most significant of all, we have the Holy Spirit, who guided Jesus in the wilderness, who stayed with him and empowered him throughout his ministry.

This same Holy Spirit, given to us at our baptism, calls us to resist the temptation to lead an easy life, and strengthens us to be God's disciples in God's world.

This is a serious challenge.