

Date 26/02/2023

Day: The 1st Sunday in Lent Year A

Congregation: Joint worship at St Ambrose, Linwood-Aranui

First Reading: Genesis 2: 15-17, 3: 1-7

Gospel: Matthew 4: 1-11

Over the last few weeks we have been especially reminded of what a chaotic world we live in and how little we have the power to order things, to control our lives and what happens to us and the world we live in. Over this past two weeks we have watched with feelings of helplessness the tremendous flooding up in the North Island, and the further falls of rain just a few days ago. On Friday was the anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces and the subsequent battle for control of Ukraine. As well as the anniversary of the earthquake here in Christchurch, we watch as Turkey and Syria suffer a much higher number of deaths than we did – again, with a feeling of helpless empathy.

At such times as these when we as individuals can do very little to stop or alleviate the pain and suffering of those going through these events, we look to our leaders to see what kind of example they set and how they propose that we as a country can help. We

also look to them to examples of solidarity and reassurance in an uncertain world.

That has a better outcome for some people more than others, depending on the leaders that they have to look up to. We seem to live in an age of untrustworthy leaders, those who abuse a position of authority in order to gain riches and power for themselves and their friends, and who seek to get power and to hold on to it at all costs. Countries that are under authoritarian rule where they have little say in government and are told only what their leaders want them to hear, with any protest met with violence and imprisonment.

This was the same situation that the people Matthew was writing for found themselves in. As a new, young Church they were living through times of persecution and testing; their secular leaders were not going to tolerate any challenge to their power structure or the structure of society. Matthew's people needed encouragement and guidance as to how to live through these times and remain faithful to God and to their church. In his story of Jesus

undergoing a time of trial in the wilderness as part of his preparation for ministry Matthew presents it as such an example for them. Jesus went through times of extreme testing and remained faithful and so they can too. And, of course, the same example and encouragement is there for us too, in the times in which we live.

The three temptations that we hear about Jesus undergoing are satisfying his hunger, testing God, and obtaining power. In each of these things we can find a parallel to the kind of temptations that we face.

The suggestion that Jesus satisfy his hunger by turning stones into bread doesn't seem at first to be such a bad idea. Fasting is testing on the body and Jesus had been fasting for forty days. However by rejecting the devil's suggestion Jesus is not indicating that we have to choose between the physical world represented by bread and the spiritual world represented by the word of God. Because we need food for our survival. The question each has to answer – as Jesus did – what will we do and where we will turn to obtain that food.

Would Matthew's congregation turn to worship of idols to obtain their daily food, or would they stay faithful to God and not compromise their faith? What compromises might we be tempted to make in order to be comfortable physically while denying the faith to which God calls us? Are we willing to satisfy only our immediate needs while neglecting the nourishment our spirits need in order to stay faithful? Or do we follow Jesus' example and – in each testing situation we find ourselves – ask ourselves what God would want us to do?

Putting God to the test by throwing himself off the Temple as the devil suggests would result in a miracle if Jesus was to do so. And we know that Jesus did perform miracles, but never for himself. He brought people back from life, he healed them of illness, and he provided food for those at the picnic from the few loaves and fishes given to him – all miracles but none of them for himself. And all of them give us a glimpse of what the Kingdom of God is like. Such a test as throwing himself from the Temple would be to ask God to do something that would focus the attention on Jesus for himself, a

case of public exhibitionism instead of showing true signs of the Kingdom of God, which doesn't rely on gimmicks.

In tempting Jesus to do this Satan quotes scripture from Psalm 91 (verses 11-12), which highlights for us how scripture can be used against the purposes of God when it is used out of context. Jesus knew the psalms as well as Satan – and so would have Matthew's listeners – and so they would have known the theme that it laid out – which didn't involve putting God to the test in order to see how faithful God would be. Matthew's listeners would have been reminded of the need to hold fast to this God who would not desert them in any of the trying circumstances in which they could well find themselves.

Read Psalm 91 for yourself and you find that it is a psalm about the faithfulness of God, who cares for us – and our reaction to that ought to be to rely on that faithfulness and not to need to put God to the test. We have enough times in life when we experience how God cares for us to not to need to bring about an occasion for God to prove it to us.

And the last temptation, the sight of all the kingdoms of the world with all their richness – a very tempting array of power and riches. And it will all be for Jesus if he worships Satan. In this trial we see the desperation of Satan to get Jesus into his power; showing just what a threat he knows Jesus is to him, as God's beloved and faithful Son.

Jesus knows where the real power lies and he is not going to succumb to the offer to become like those rulers who seek their own advantages over those of the people they ruled. Jesus was not about furthering the current, broken system that allowed power to be held by a few people at the top controlling the resources while repressing those under them. This also is a reminder to Matthew's people – and to us – that we need to decide which system we are working for and to habitually adapt the attitudes and behaviours that support that system. The temptation is to go along with the systems of power that exist rather than confront them for fear of what repercussions that may have for us.

Jesus invites us to an alternative; to following the way of God that means living God's Kingdom into being through love, peace, justice, equal opportunity and abundance for all. As we move into Lent may we be on the alert for the ways in which we will be tempted to move away from God by taking the easy path that upholds unjust systems. Let us counter those temptations with our determination to follow Jesus' actions and counter the sly suggestions with the words of scripture and the promise of God to always be with us in all circumstances, especially when chaos strikes our world or we find ourselves in times of trouble and trial.