Sermon – Lent One St Godwald’s 2022

Hand around box of celebrations – can I tempt anyone?

I wonder what thought processes are currently going around the church…on a diet; too close to lunch; eating sweets in church; don’t want sticky fingers; promised myself I wouldn’t eat chocolate in Lent…

Perhaps we’re looking at our neighbour too to watch what they might do…spouses might take a surreptitious glance at a partner, half wishing for permission and half wishing not to be noticed…

Lent is, in my case, 40 days in which to fail yet again to resolve successfully to be good. I just don’t seem to have the stomach for self-discipline. The more I think about resisting temptation, the more temptations appear to surround me.

This morning’s gospel reading is all about Jesus’ temptations in the desert; temptations that preceded his ministry.

There are three and they are very famous of course:

First, the temptation to turn a stone into a loaf of bread

Second, the temptation to worship the devil in return for power

Third, the temptation to treat life and faith flippantly

I want to think briefly about each of these temptations in a fresh way this morning, by focusing on what Jesus says in response to the devil’s tempting.

In response to the first temptation Jesus says: One does not live by bread alone.

This temptation demands that we consider what it is that we depend upon. The things of this world or the things of God.

We don’t learn scripture verses in the same way as previous generations did, but here is one for you to remember. It comes from Proverbs.

Trust in the Lord with all your might, and be not wise in your own sight…

In other words, depend first upon the wisdom of God, and not the so-called wisdom of the world. A good teaching for Lent for all of us, young and old.

In response to the second temptation, Jesus declares: Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him…

This temptation demands that we consider what it is that we worship. When does love of something, turn into an obsession and when does an obsession turn into idolatry? Money is the obvious example but there are plenty of others too…indeed, almost anything we love can become an idol if we allow it too. Travel, exercise, collecting, even ourselves…we’re called to love our neighbour as much as we love ourselves, but if we love ourselves too much…then our self-centredness becomes obsessive and eventually idolatrous…

One idol especially dominant in our world at this time, is power. Sooner or later, Vladimir Putin will discover just how powerless he is; as he pursues a war devoid of virtue, he will eventually discover that his worship of power is not only self-defeating but self-destructive. Our prayer must be that those who oppose him are not similarly deceived and can rise above the temptation to adopt the always temporary and often vacuous victor’s crown.

In response to the third temptation, Jesus says: Do not put the Lord your God to the test.

By now you will probably be familiar with my phrase: there is nothing you can do to make God love you any more, and there is nothing you can do to make God love you any less.

God does not test us. God’s love of us is unconditional, God’s love is simply a facet of the nature of God.

Our response to God should be similar - freely, generously and graciously offered.

God does not demand our love nor does God require it. But it’s only when we love God, that life makes sense.

God may not test us but we test God all the time. Not least in our prayers which, if we’re not careful, drift towards lists of requests and even demands…let’s be honest, who hasn’t prayed a version of “God if only you will solve ‘x’ I will serve you forever”. Even if we believe God can intervene in these mortal matters, we know it is unlikely to truly change us. God wants us to change regardless of the situations we face, perhaps even because of the situations we face.

A few years ago, I read ‘Dare to be a Daniel’ the title of Tony Benn’s first book of memories which takes us up to the year 1960 when he began publishing his daily dairies. We could all take up that refrain for Lent and ‘dare to be a Daniel’ standing up for our beliefs and accepting the consequences, in faith.

In ‘Dare to be a Daniel’ there is a lovely anecdote relating – if I recall correctly – to Tony Benn’s rather austere father. The family have very strong non-conformist roots. One of his father’s favourite sayings was this:

‘don’t wrestle with a chimney sweep”

Now the meaning has nothing to do with encouraging the social isolation of chimney sweeps. What Tony Benn’s father is trying to say is this: if you play or live around people who live dirty lives and mistreat or exploit others, the dirt will infect your own life too. It’s a sombre warning about the importance of ensuring that we protect the integrity of our lives as much as possible.

The temptations offer us practical advice that we can all put to good use at the beginning of Lent.

Depend on God;

Beware of idols creeping into your life;

Look after the precious gift of life that is you, and love God for no other reason than that God is love.

May this Lent for each of us be a time when we renew our lives spiritually; reflect upon the health of our lives wisely, and care for one another gently, Amen.