**Matthew 4:1-11**

Have you ever noticed that immediately after a good time, you come down with a bump? You have a really good holiday, you travel home feeling relaxed and happy, and as soon as you open the door, there’s the pile of bills on the mat, a load of e-mails in your inbox, and the leprechauns somehow don’t seem to have dealt with any of the unfinished jobs you left in the house when you set out. It’s back to normal, and tomorrow you’ll have the pleasure of your boss, your teacher or your difficult neighbour to look forward to. I always suffer from post-retreat blues. I go away and generally spend a few days pretty much in silence, and then I have to come back and talk to… parishioners…

The fact of life that highs are always followed by lows, is also true of the spiritual life.

And this happened to Jesus.

Luke tells us, ‘Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan.’ Jesus is returning from his baptism, that extraordinary day when he saw the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descending on him, heard God the Father’s voice, ‘You are my beloved Son,’ felt the Spirit taking hold of him and filling him with new power to be God’s Messiah. It was a wonderful, inspiring moment – it may have been the first time that Jesus fully realised that he was the Son of God. But what happens next?: forty days of fasting, prayer and temptation.

I think we get this story wrong if we think it was easy for Jesus to decide what he did decide. It sounds as though the devil turns up and sits opposite Jesus and makes suggestions, and each time Jesus calmly produces the statement to knock the devil flat. But temptation doesn’t work like that.

I think it’s more likely the temptation was inside Jesus’s head so to speak, enflaming his imagination, tapping into his deepest longings, trying to twist all that was best in Jesus to corrupt ends. If Jesus hadn’t really wanted to do those things, then we wouldn’t be able to say he was tempted. It was a real struggle, a battle to discern God’s way and to hold to it.

The first temptation is to turn stones into bread. Some may think it possibly would have been a better temptation if he’d be asked to turn the stones into Chocolate, but (shock horror) there wasn’t chocolate in Jesus’ day and bread was the staple food.

Perhaps Jesus was filled with a generous longing to heal and give to people everything they wanted. To do this would have been for his own good and about his physical self.

But Jesus resists the temptation, because time and time again we see he is called to do something much more important, to draw people by his example beyond this world and its cares and pleasures and introduce them to God. ‘You shall not live by bread alone.’ It’s not enough to be physically well off if your spirit is far from God.

God is our true food and we need to learn to hunger for him. But the temptation was always there; so much easier to give people what they want.

So with the second temptation. The devil offers Jesus the world, political power like that of the Roman Emperor, power with which he could do so much good. Have you ever fantasised about what we would do if you ran the universe?

I don’t know if you’ve seen the film Bruce Almighty? If you haven’t, you need to. Bruce becomes God and has a go at answering people’s prayers. There’s a hilarious set of scenes where post-it notes are flying everywhere, covering his room, as he tries to respond to all the requests. In the end he just sets up his computer to answer ‘yes’ to everything. People all over the world end up winning the lottery. Presumably the thing the film makers think that most people pray for? If I ran the world, no one would have to get up before 10am each morning and all public transport would be entirely free (well, I guess for many of you it is!)

Again, this temptation to be in power must have been real to Jesus. He could certainly have made a better job of running Palestine than Herod or Pontius Pilate. But his work is not about compelling people to be good, controlling them, forcing them to cooperate with God’s plan for their lives.

Jesus runs a mile from coercion, from political organisation, from any attempt to make people do what he says. He calls his disciples, but when people volunteer to follow him he seems to do his best to put them off. When the people want to make him king, he hurries up into the mountains and hides until it is safe to come out. The temptation to take control was always there, and he always resisted it. Even when they arrested him he said, ‘I could ask my Father to send me twelve legions of angels,’  - and no doubt there was a bit of him that would have liked to do just that – ‘but how then should the scriptures be fulfilled?’

So, Jesus is not going to be a Saviour for consumers, giving everybody exactly what they want… He says look to God to sustain you. Nor is he going to be a political Saviour, telling everybody exactly what they must do… He says follow me. Could he perhaps be a celebrity?

Wat about a spectacular stunt? Floating unhurt from the top of the Temple, making himself the centre of attention, *amazing* people into faith. Again, that’s the Saviour a lot of people want. Prove it. Give me a guarantee that God’s real. I want evidence. And again, Jesus must have been really attracted to this style of work. Why not set things up to get maximum publicity? But he knows he must shun this media-courting self-promoting way. He is called to be the servant, the humble one, showing us how to live. He is not on earth to dare God to show his hand, but to submit to what the Father has ordained. This was the last temptation of Christ. On the cross, they shouted at him, ‘Come down and we will believe.’ That would have been even better than jumping off the Temple; but he didn’t do it. He stayed put, bleeding and dying for love of us, in obedience to the strange way of suffering and redemption which God had called him to.

During lent we create a bit of artificial temptation. We fast and pray and give, and we can sometimes struggle to keep these things up. This is good for us in terms of our Spiritual health and focusing on Jesus. But the real wilderness times will come without our looking for them, the times (perhaps after something joyful) when everything seems flat and dull. There’s no point in praying, church is just tedious, the sacraments empty ritual, the Bible a very long book rather less readable than most.

Are those times when God is absent? No! Those are the very times when we must resist the temptation to become disaffected, listening out for God’s true voice, distinguishing his true leading to move us forward.

Let me sum up, and perhaps see what applies to you most today.

Stones into Bread: We don’t follow a Saviour for consumers. We mustn’t fall into the trap of giving people what they want and focusing the most on our material lives. We should orientate ourselves spiritually to God and help others to do so too.

The devil offering the world: We don’t follow a political saviour. We shouldn’t be dictating to people what they should or shouldn’t do. We need to take the plank out of our own eye and realise that we (and the church of England) get a lot of things wrong and we must to humble ourselves. During lent, maybe reflect on how you can serve those around you and think of areas where you might be tempted to take control or build up power…

Jump off the Temple: We don’t follow a celebrity. We don’t need to advertise everything as rosy and shiny. Let’s be real about our Christian lives. That’s the best evidence for our beliefs- speaking about keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus in the *difficulties* and the joys. During Lent, maybe reflect on how you can be more honest about the struggles and share with this church and those you meet the authentic life of faith…